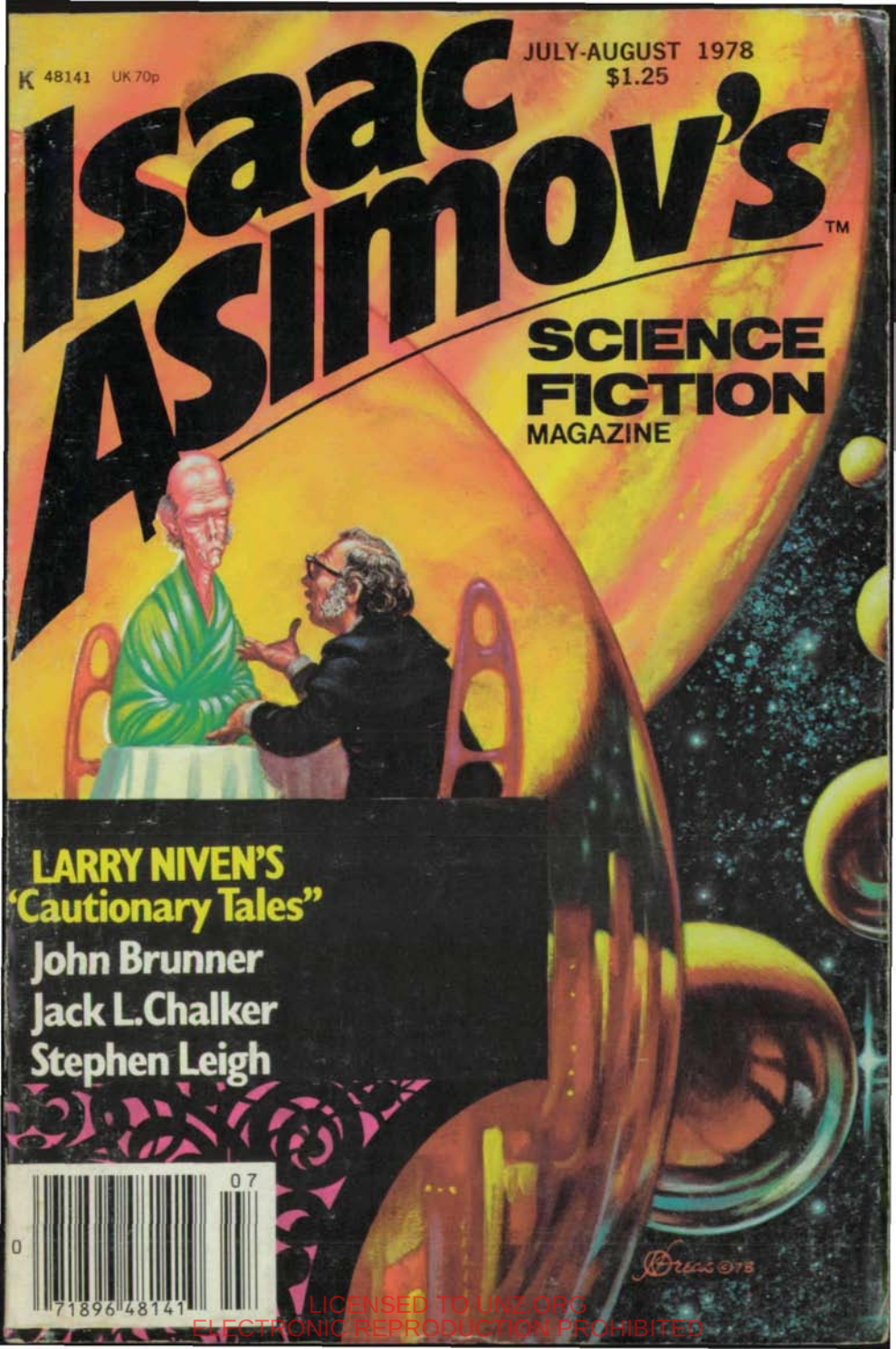

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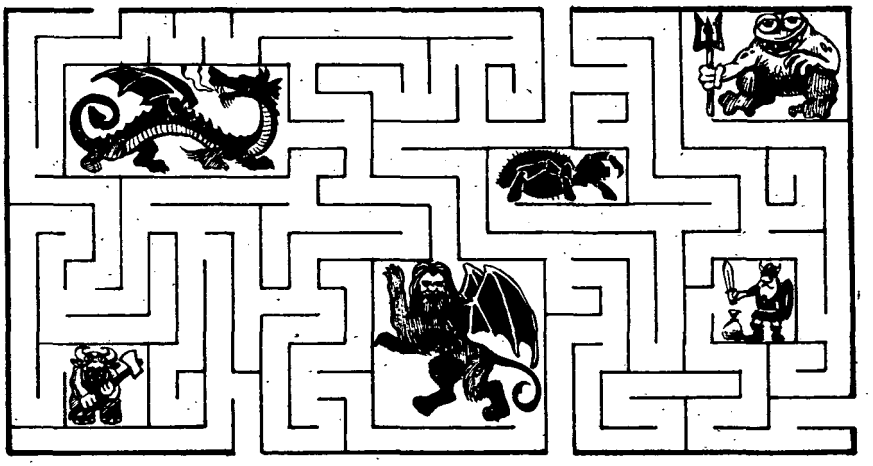

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EDITORIAL: IT'S A FUNNY THING

It's a funny thing, but many beginners try to write humorous science fiction. What makes it funny is that being funny is very difficult, and some extremely good science fiction writers can't handle humor—yet so many beginners think they can.

Why is being funny so difficult?

For one thing, you're not allowed to miss. If you're trying for pathos, you can end up being fairly pathetic and you get a part-score and may even sell the story if it ends up moving the editor, though not quite to tears. If you try for suspense, you can be moderately suspenseful and sell by at least speeding the editor's heart, even if you don't send it racing madly.

You can hit the outer rings of the target, if not the bull's-eye, in any of the other characteristics sought for in fiction and still make a sale.

Except humor. The target for humor is just bull's-eye. There are no outer rings.

Can you imagine something being partly funny? Have you ever heard someone tell a story that is only somewhat humorous? What happens?

Right! Nobody laughs. At best, someone may manage a polite smile.

Yet a funny story, when it *is* funny, is a very good thing and should be encouraged. Good humor, wit, even slapstick, when well-done, add to the gaiety of nations and the eupepsia* of individuals.

Still, even the best of us aren't born already knowing how to write humorously. We have to practice a little to begin with, to see if we have the talent—and if we do, we have to develop that talent by continuing to practice.

Here are some rules, then, that may be helpful.

1. Keep it brief. Unless you're a born comic genius, a Mark Twain or a P. G. Wodehouse, you are not going to maintain a

* So look it up. How will you become a writer if you don't develop your vocabulary?

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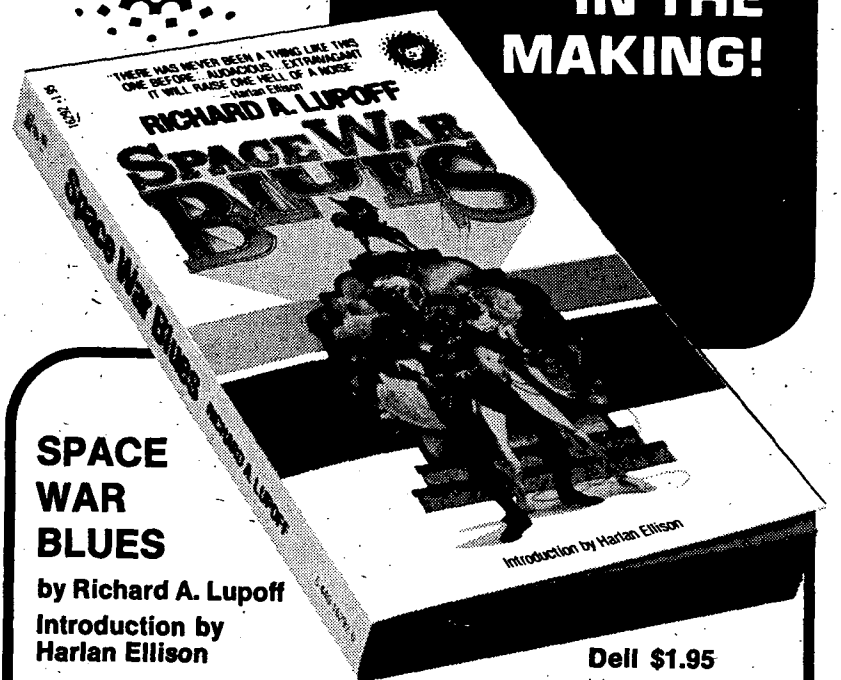
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satisfactory and even level of humor for the length of a novel. In fact, the longer you try to maintain it, the less likely you are to avoid falling off into flatness or zooming upward into painful travesty. My own feeling is that you ought to keep it down to three thousand words or less.

2. Don't try to make every single sentence killingly humorous. In the first place, you'll wear yourself out and die young, and a dead author is no good to us. In the second place, you won't succeed. And in the third, continuous humor, even if achieved, is not likely to be effective. The reader will wear himself out laughing early in the game and find the rest of the story tedious. The periodic flashes that give time for the reader to build up his reserves of laughter in between are best.

3. Humor is not, in itself, a story. Humor, if well-done, will make a good story better; but it will not make a bad story good. If you're writing a funny science fiction story, make sure then that if the fun is subtracted, what is left will still be a reasonably good science fiction story in itself.

Now let us consider one particular subdivision of the humorous science fiction story: the "Ferdinand Feghoot."* This consists of a story whose only reason for existence is that it ends in an elaborate pun.

There are rules here, too.

1. Since the final pun supports the story, you can see that you mustn't overload the pun with an over-long story, or the anticlimax will arouse murderous rage [growl] in even the Gentlest of Editors—which is how George may be described. Keep it very short, then; I would say not more than 500 words.

2. Even those 500 words must make up a reasonable science fiction story and one that does not too obviously strain itself in preparation for the pun. Ideally, the reader should not suspect that a pun is on the way so that he doesn't have time to intensify his feelings of homicidal hostility.

3. Strive for the golden mean. The punning phrase should be long enough to strike the reader as ingenious, but not so long that it wearies him before it is done. Ideally, he should be able to read the entire phrase at a glance.

Again the distance between the pun and the true phrase should

* The name is derived from a series by Grendel Briarton (Reginald Bretnor) about a gentleman with that name. The stories have appeared in two books and three magazines, including this one.

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be great enough to be ingenious and unpredictable, but not so strained that even after the reader reads it there is a perceptible period of time in which he doesn't know what you're talking about. Remember that the point of a joke must be caught at once. Even a short pause can be fatal to laughter.

4. A pun is meant for the ear. It's the *sound* that counts, not the appearance. A singer who trips on a dock and falls into the harbor is off-quay in a new way. Never mind that "quay" doesn't look like "key", the pronounciation is identical.

On the other hand, there's no point in saying that an interpreter who doesn't know his etiquette is useless in Warsaw because he "lacks polish." That may be an optical pun, but even in reading silently you hear the words in your mind and "polish" simply doesn't sound like "Polish" and never mind the identity in spelling.

To summarize, the ideal Ferdinand Feghoot, in my own immodest opinion, is my story "Sure Thing" in the Summer, 1977, *IA'sfm*. Reread it and you'll see. There are also two authentic, Grendel Briarton Feghoots in the Fall, 1977, *IA'sfm*, if you want to compare them.

The final point to remember is a sad one. Even a good humor-

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ous story or an excellent Ferdinand Feghoot isn't guaranteed an acceptance. A magazine must contain variety if it is to be successful, and that variety must reflect, with reasonable accuracy, the general biases and tastes of its readers.

The fact is that many people are not fond of humor and very many nourish a bigoted antipathy toward the harmless pun. So we must sprinkle the light-hearted tale in a light-handed way over the contents page, while the Ferdinand Feghoot can come into play only when the antennae of the Gentle Editor quiver to him the message that enough of an interval has passed since the last batch, to make the printing of a new one safe.

But I assure you that George and I (who are as one on all things literary) are merry youngsters whose penchant for a chuckle is exceeded only by our love of a belly-laugh, and we will make the magazine as happy as the traffic will bear—if the writers coöperate.

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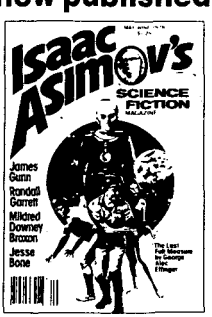

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THE NEW MAGAZINE

When, two years ago, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* was preparing its first issue, I wrote an editorial in which I made no inflated claims. I said, "Life is risky for magazines in these days of television and paperbacks so we are starting as a quarterly. What reader support we'll get is now in the lap of the gods, but if things go as we earnestly hope they do, we will work our way up to monthly as soon as we can."

As is happens, the magazine has done well, better than we expected in fact, thanks to George Scithers's hard work and good judgement, and to Joel Davis's shrewd business acumen. We are now bimonthly and will soon go monthly.

The best evidence of success is that we are about to try again. A second magazine will soon be on the stands — *Asimov's SF ADVENTURE Magazine*. It will be more action-oriented; but behind it, too, will be the Scithers-Davis winning combination. Again I make no inflated claims, but we are starting as a quarterly, and with reader support we will progress toward greater frequency.

If you like *IA'sfm*, you may well like *AsfAm* as well. Try it.

— Isaac Asimov

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ON BOOKS
by Charles N. Brown

Books to be reviewed by Mr. Brown should be sent—as advance galleys when at all possible, followed by finished books—to him at Box 13124, Oakland CA 94661.

Lucifer's Hammer by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle: Playboy Press, 1977, 494pp., $10.00.
The White Dragon by Anne McCaffrey: Del Rey/Ballantine, 1978, 464pp., $8.95.
Well of Shuian by C. J. Cherryh: DAW, 1977, 256pp., $1.95 (paper).
The Faded Sun: Kesrith by C. J. Cherryh: Science Fiction Book Club, 1978, 248pp., $1.98; DAW (forthcoming).
The 1978 Annual World's Best SF edited by Donald A. Wollheim: DAW, 1978, 272pp., $1.95 (paper).
The Earth Book of Stormgate by Poul Anderson: Berkley/Putnam, 1978, 348pp., $10.95.
Swords and Deviltry by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 254 + xxxi pp., $8.50.
Swords Against Death by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 251pp., $8.50.
Swords Against Wizardry by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 188pp., $8.50.
Swords in the Mist by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 190pp., $8.50.
The Swords of Lankhmar by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 224pp., $8.50.
Swords and Ice Magic by Fritz Leiber: Gregg, 1977, 243pp., $8.50.
Dhalgren by Samuel R. Delany: Gregg, 1977, 879 + xliii pp., $35.00.
Driftglass by Samuel R. Delany: Gregg, 1977, 279 + xxxvi pp., $13.00.
Nova by Samuel R. Delany: Gregg, 1977, 215 + xvii pp., $12.00.
Empire Star by Samuel R. Delany: Gregg, 1977, 87 + xiii pp., $8.00.
The Ballad of Beta-2 by Samuel R. Delany: Gregg, 1977, 124 + x pp., $8.00.

We talk about science fiction, mysteries, gothics, and westerns

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as genre or category fiction as opposed to general fiction, indicating that these fields are somehow limited in scope or sales. Actually, there is some confusion here because we're mixing two different things—literary categories and commercial categories.

A literary category implies formula plotting and conventions. There is a lot of it in science fiction, but mostly sub-categories such as space opera, disaster novels, etc. Overall, science fiction is too varied to be as rigid a category as gothics, nurse novels, or westerns.

On the other hand, science fiction is definitely a commercial category. Science fiction books are usually bought by science fiction readers who recognize these books by their covers and their placement in the science fiction section of a bookstore. The advantages of this to the publisher and bookseller are easily seen. Booksellers know where to put the book, science fiction readers know where to find it, and the publisher is guaranteed a minimum sale because many readers buy *every* SF book they can find. The publisher also saves money because he doesn't have to do any advertising. The disadvantage is that the audience and sales are limited. A bookseller will order hundreds of copies of a Harold Robbins novel and give it major display space, but will only order a few copies of each science fiction book and stick it over in the corner with the rest of them. The thing to note is that the commercial science fiction genre is independent of the contents of the book. Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Harlan Ellison are found in the SF section while Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King, and John Collier are not, even though their work is similar. Things have changed somewhat for the better in the last year, with some SF books getting major advertising and therefore major display, but we still have a long way to go.

There's one genre which isn't discussed too often. It's called best-seller fiction. The elements are as set as those in a standard gothic novel. There should be a fairly large cast of characters from all walks of life, who are brought together later in the book by the disaster, boat trip, hotel, airplane flight, etc. The characters should be one dimensional and each should represent either a stereotype or a single opinion. The story should be strongly paranoid (something or somebody *is* out to get us!), have a whiff of corruption in high places, and a dollop of sex (but not too kinky). There should be some behind-the-scene views which show that the author has done research, a lot of crusading, a little romance, and some grisly death scenes. They should also be extra

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long novels. An anti-technology stance and some simplistic philosophising are recommended but not required. Two perfect examples from recent years are *The Glass Inferno* by Thomas Scortia and Frank Robinson, and *Condominium* by John D. MacDonald. Now, not every best-seller novel makes the best seller list, nor is every best selling book part of the genre, but the overlap is very high.

When I tried to get an advance copy of *Lucifer's Hammer* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, I was told that the book wasn't science fiction. In vain, I argued that a novel which concerns a comet hitting the Earth and destroying civilization is certainly science fiction. Finally, after publication, one of the editors at Playboy Press sent me a copy. The publicity people were right. *Lucifer's Hammer* isn't science fiction. It's a nearly perfect best-seller novel with science fiction trappings. There's 150 pages of build-up to the disaster, 50 pages of catastrophe, and nearly 300 pages of post-catastrophe. The huge cast of characters is incredibly stereotyped; and the second half of the book, the back-to-the-primitive section, covers just about every paranoid fear you've ever thought of. On the plus side, the pacing is very good; and, despite its inordinate length, the book is very fast reading with few dull moments. The major fault with the book is the one all best-seller novels have in common—a complete lack of inventiveness. I suspect that it will be a very successful paperback, be made into a terrible movie, and then be forgotten because it's interchangeable with any other novel in the best-selling genre.

The White Dragon by Anne McCaffrey, the long-awaited third (or fifth) book in the "Dragonrider" series, is finally here and, unlike most sequels, is not a disappointment. McCaffrey has improved as a writer since the first book in this series and is paying more attention to detail. The world of Pern, its people and problems, and—of course—its dragons, has been extremely popular since it was introduced to readers in 1967 and won the writer both Hugo and Nebula awards. *Dragonflight* (1968), the first book in the series, and *Dragonquest* (1971), its direct sequel, are excellent adventure stories with sympathetic characters and exotic backgrounds. The two "side-bar" juveniles, *Dragonsong* (1976) and *Dragonsinger* (1977) didn't advance the main plot at all, but were strong on background and characterization. A section of the current volume appeared as a limited editor book, *A Time When* (1975), but has been heavily rewritten. The earlier version is now only of interest to collectors. *The White Dragon,* a sequel to both

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the adult and juvenile parts of the series, has a new hero, Jaxom, who was born in book one. The major characters from the earlier books all play supporting roles here. Unlike the earlier volumes, where outside dangers were paramount, *The White Dragon* is more involved with internal discoveries and politics. As with any good sequel, the problems arise from the solutions in the earlier books. *The White Dragon* is a fine science fiction novel and should be one of the outstanding books of 1978.

C. J. Cherryh, who won the John W. Campbell Award last year for best new writer, is the answer to a reader's dream in that she is both good and prolific. We have two new books on hand, and the year is still young. *Well of Shiuan,* a continuation of Cherryh's first book, *Gate of Ivrel* (1976), is a fast moving, colorful adventure story in the vein made popular by Andre Norton. It's not a particularly deep book, but it succeeds admirably as an example of the limited but popular science-fantasy sub-genre. As with the first book in the series, there are hints of darker forces in the background which will probably come to the forefront in further sequels. I'm looking forward to them. Her second new book, *The Faded Sun: Kesrith,* succeeds in the difficult feat of presenting an alien race which is both sympathetic and still alien enough. Furthermore, the major part of the novel is told from the alien's viewpoint. Cherryh's major strengths, good background and sympathetic characterization, are used to good effect in this, the best of her books up to now.

Donald A. Wollheim's *The 1978 Annual World's Best SF* contains ten stories, only two of which I didn't care for. There are three excellent long stories, "In the Hall of the Martian Kings" by John Varley, "The House of Compassionate Sharers" by Michael Bishop, and "Eyes of Amber" by Joan D. Vinge, as well as five shorter works I'd rate "B" or "B+". Wollheim continues to produce a high quality volume every year, and I suggest you don't miss it.

Poul Anderson's name on the cover of a book has always been a guarantee of solid, interesting, well-written science fiction or fantasy. *The Earth Book of Stormgate,* which is a collection of the shorter fiction in his "Polesotechnic League" series plus the Van Rijn novel *The Man Who Counts* (*War of the Winged Men*) is no exception. There is an interesting framework which turns it into a quasi-novel, but it really isn't needed. Anderson is an excellent writer at any length, and the half-dozen stories from such obscure sources as *Boys Life* and various juvenile original anthologies are just as interesting as the half-dozen from *Analog* and *F&SF.*

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Highly recommended.

Gregg Press continues to produce some of the finest limited-edition, hardcover reprints in the field. Their matched set of the six volumes in Fritz Leiber's "Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser" series is something of a high point. Hardcover book prices have been approaching $10.00 even with cheap cardboard bindings, so it's a surprise to find these handsome clothbound books on fine paper for only $8.50 each ($45.00 for the full set). The text is that of the Ace paperbacks, but more easily readable. The series is one of the best examples of literate sword and sorcery and contains some of Leiber's finest writing. The stories vary from pure humor to pure horror, from pure *Conan* to pure Cabell, and just about everything in between. Volume 1, *Swords and Deviltry* (1970) has an updated introduction as well as maps and decorations (common to all volumes). Volume 2, *Swords Against Death* (1970) adds the 1973 introduction; Volume 3, *Swords in the Mist* (1968) has a new foreword, which includes part of a letter by H. P. Lovecraft on my favorite story in the series, "Adept's Gambit." Volume 4, *Swords Against Wizardry* (1968), adds the 1973 foreword; Volume 5, *The Swords of Lankhmar* (1968), is the only novel in the series; Volume 6, *Swords and Ice Magic* (1977) contains the complete novel *Rime Isle* as well as six other stories including the outstanding mood piece, "The Sadness of the Executioner." The set, limited to an edition of 1,000 copies, is a must for the serious collector.

Gregg Press has added five volumes to its library reprint set of books by Samuel R. Delany. Unlike the Leiber set, these are limited to a few hundred copies and are thus fairly expensive. On the other hand, they often have revised texts and critical introductions which make them very valuable. The first hardcover edition of *Dahlgren* (1974) has a very interesting introduction by Jean Mark Gawron which explains exactly what Delany is trying to do. The text has also been corrected and there is a note by Delany on these corrections. For some unknown reason, Gregg used a very bulky paper on this edition. With its 3½ inch thickness and green cloth, it could easily be mistaken for an edition of *The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*. *Driftglass* (1971), Delany's only collection of short stories, has an excellent meaty introduction by Robert Thurston as well as a corrected text. In many ways, Delany is even better as a short story writer than as a novelist. "Aye, and Gomorrah," "The Star Pit," and "Time Considered . . ." are among the very best SF short fiction, while his novels tend to have pacing problems and extraneous detail. The

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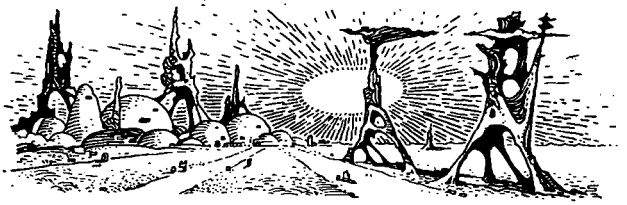
new Gregg edition of Delany's best novel, *Nova* (1968), has an insightful introduction by Algis Budrys which is by no means entirely complimentary. The text is that of the Bantam paperback, not that of the jumbled Doubleday hardcover. The other two books, *Empire Star* (1966) and *The Ballad of Beta-2* (1965) are minor short novels. The text of *Empire Star* has been corrected. For information on these and other Gregg Press reprints, write: Gregg Press, 70 Lincoln St., Boston MA 02111.



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Russ, Joanna	THE TWO OF THEM	Berkley/Putnam	8.95	6.95
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CAUTIONARY TALES
by Larry Niven

The author sold his first story in 1964; since then, he's become best known for his "known space" series, which reached a notable climax with the novel Ringworld. *Recently, he's worked with Dr. Jerry Pournelle on such collaborations as* The Mote in God's Eye *and* Lucifer's Hammer. *They are at work on another such, while Mr. Niven will soon finish a sequel to* Ringworld.

Taller than a man, thinner than a man, with a long neck and eyes set wide apart in his head, the creature still resembled a man; and he had aged like a man. Cosmic rays had robbed his fur of color, leaving a grey-white ruff along the base of his skull and over both ears. His pastel-pink skin was deeply wrinkled and marked with darker blotches. He carried himself like something precious and fragile. He was coming across the balcony toward Gordon.

Gordon had brought a packaged lunch from the Embassy. He ate alone. The bubble-world's landscape curled up and over his head: yellow-and-scarlet parkland, slate-colored buildings that bulged at the top. Below the balcony, patterned stars streamed beneath several square miles of window. There were a dozen breeds of alien on the public balcony, at least two of which had to be pets or symbiotes of other aliens; and no humans but for Gordon. Gordon wondered if the ancient humanoid resented his staring . . . then stared in earnest as the creature stopped before

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his table. The alien said, "May I break your privacy?"

Gordon nodded; but that could be misinterpreted, so he said, "I'm glad of the company."

The alien carefully lowered himself until he sat cross-legged across the table. He said, "I seek never to die."

Gordon's heart jumped into his throat. "I'm not sure what you mean," he said cautiously. "The Fountain of Youth?"

"I do not care what form it takes." The alien spoke the Trade Language well, but his strange throat added a castinet-like clicking. "Our own legend holds no fountain. When we learned to cross between stars we found the legend of immortality wherever there were thinking beings. Whatever their shape or size or intelligence, whether they make their own worlds or make only clay pots, they all tell the tales of people who live forever."

"It's hard not to wonder if they have some basis," Gordon encouraged him.

The alien's head snapped around, fast enough and far enough to break a man's neck. The prominent lumps bobbing in his throat were of alien shape: not Adam's Apple, but someone else's. "It must be so. I have searched too long for it to be false. You, have you ever found clues to the secret of living forever?"

Gordon searched when he could, when his Embassy job permitted it. There had been rumors about the Ftokteek. Gordon had followed the rumors out of human space, toward the galactic core and the Ftokteek Empire, to this Ftokteek-dominated meeting place of disparate life forms, this cloud of bubble-worlds of varying gravities and atmospheres. Gordon was middle-aged now, and Sol was invisible even to orbiting telescopes, and the Ftokteek died like anyone else.

He said, "We've got the legends. Look them up in the Human Embassy library. Ponce de Leon, and Gilgamesh, and Orpheus, and Tithonus, and . . . every god we ever had lived forever, if he didn't die by violence, and some could heal from that. Some religions say that some part of us lives on after we die."

"I will go to your library tomorrow," the alien said without enthusiasm. "Do you have no more than legends?"

"No, but . . . do other species tell cautionary tales?"

"I do not understand."

Gordon said, "Some of our legends say you wouldn't want to live forever. Tithonus, for instance. A goddess gave him the gift of living forever, but she forgot to keep him young. He withered into a lizard. Adam and Eve were exiled by God; He was afraid they'd

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learn the secret of immortality and think they were as good as Him. Orpheus tried to bring a woman back from the dead. Some of the stories say you can't get immortality, and some say you'd go insane with boredom."

The alien pondered. "The tale tellers disdain immortality because they cannot have it. Jealousy? Could immortal beings have walked among you once?"

Gordon laughed. "I doubt it. Was that what made you come to me?"

"I go to the worlds where many species meet. When I see a creature new to me, then I ask. Sometimes I can sense others like me, who want never to die."

Gordon looked down past the edge of the balcony, down through the great window at the banded Jovian planet that held this swarm of bubble-worlds in their orbits. He came here every day; small wonder that the alien had picked him out. He came because he would not eat with the others. They thought he was crazy. He thought of them as mayflies, with their attention always on the passing moment, and no thought for the future. He thought of himself as an ambitious mayfly; and he ate alone.

The alien was saying, "When I was young I looked for the secret among the most advanced species. The great interstellar empires, the makers of artificial worlds, the creatures who mine stars for elements and send ships through the universe seeking ever more knowledge, would build their own immortality. But they die as you and I die. Some races live longer than mine, but they all die."

"The Ftokteek have a computerized library the size of a small planet," Gordon said. He meant to get there someday, if he lived. "It must know damn near everything."

The alien answered with a whispery chuckle. "No bigger than a moon is the Ftokteek library. It told me nothing I could use."

The banded world passed from view.

"Then I looked among primitives," the alien said, "who live closer to their legends. They die. When I thought to talk to their ghosts, there was nothing, though I used their own techniques. Afterward I searched the vicinities of the black holes and other strange pockets of the universe, hoping that there may be places where entropy reverses itself. I found nothing. I examined the mathematics that describe the universe. I have learned a score of mathematical systems, and none hold any hope of entropy reversal, natural or created."

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Gordon watched stars pass below his feet. He said, "Relativity. We used to think that if you traveled faster than light, time would reverse itself."

"I know eight systems of travelling faster than light—"

"Eight? What is there besides ours and the Ftokteek drive?"

"Six others. I rode them all, and always I arrived older. My time runs short. I never examined the quasars, and now I would not live to reach them. What else is left? I have been searching for fourteen thousand years—" The alien didn't notice when Gordon made a peculiar hissing sound. "—in our counting. Less in yours, perhaps. Our world huddles closer to a cooler sun than this. Our year is twenty-one million standard seconds."

"What are you *saying?* Ours is only thirty-one million—"

"My present age is three hundred thirty-six point seven billion standard seconds in the Ftokteek counting."

"Ten thousand Earth years. More!"

"Far too long. I never mated. None carry my genes. Now none ever will, unless I can grow young again. There is little time left."

"But *why?*"

The alien seemed startled. "Because it is not enough. Because I am afraid to die. Are you short-lived, then?"

"Yes," said Gordon.

"Well, I have traveled with short-lived companions. They die, I mourn. I need a companion with the strength of youth. My spacecraft is better than any you could command. You may benefit from my research. We breath a similar air mixture, our bodies use the same chemistry, we search for the same treasure. Will you join my quest?"

"No."

"But . . . I sensed that you seek immortality. I am never wrong. Don't you feel it, the certainty that there is a way to thwart entropy, to live forever?"

"I used to think so," said Gordon.

In the morning he arranged passage home to Sol system. Ten thousand years wasn't enough . . . no lifetime was enough, unless you lived it in such a way as to make it enough.

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THE GREAT RING OF NEPTUNE
by Martin Gardner

The puzzle-story, this time around, has three questions and three answers.

Captain Quank, the spaceship's commanding officer, was busy penciling diagrams. Occasionally he punched the keys of his desk calculator.

The ship's mission was to obtain close-up data on the planet Neptune. To the crew's astonishment, they had found the planet surrounded by one enormous ring of low-density dust. It was no more than a centimeter thick—totally invisible in earth's telescopes.

The ring was bordered by two perfectly concentric circles. The ship had cruised above the ring on a straight line that crossed the outer circle at *A*, was tangent to the inner circle at *B*, and crossed the outer circle again at *C*. (See illustration.)

"We know that distance *AC* is 200,000 kilometers," said Captain Quank. "The question is—what's the ring's area?"

"Won't we need to know the radii of the outer and inner circles?" asked Lieutenant Flarp.

"We'll get that information eventually," said the captain. "But now we don't need it. According to a curious theorem—I remember it from an undergraduate course in Euclidean geometry—the area of the ring is uniquely determined by this chord *AC*."

"You mean," said the lieutenant, "that given the length of *AC*, the ring's area is a constant regardless of the sizes of the circles?"

"Right! It's hard to believe, but it's true. I'm trying to remember how to calculate the area."

First question: What's the area of Neptune's great ring? For the answer, see page 53.

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HORSELESS CARRIAGE
by Michael A. Banks

Mr. Banks, now 26, lives in Ohio; he's married, with two children. In addition to writing—mostly articles on topics ranging from electric automobiles to pinball machines—he travels about the Midwest, keeping vending machines in working order. This story is his first solo fiction sale.

I was leafing through the morning mail, hoping I'd find something other than those useless solar energy gadgets everyone was stealing from one another, when I heard the door to the outer office open. I looked up and saw Karl Epworth, looking his usual dull self in an out of date tweed jacket.

"Good morning—" I began, then ducked as he threw something about the size of a cigarette pack at me.

Whatever it was didn't reach me, though. As it came toward me, it rose to the ceiling, hit the plaster with a small click, and stayed there, humming. I stared at it, open-mouthed, then looked back to Epworth. He produced another box and dropped it. The box fell up.

At the very least, I was nonplussed. But that's not to say my brain was out of gear; I was already trying to come up with a ballpark figure on the potential value of what evidently was a workable anti-gravity device. That sort of thinking is a reflex action with me—I sell ideas. People like Epworth think things up, and then bring their ideas to me because they haven't any business sense.

You've heard of StikSand? Maybe your children have some. It's the stuff that looks and acts like sand, but isn't. Little granules of something or other with "enhanced molecular polarity". Something along those lines. Anyway, kids play with it the same way they would with real sand—in the house, even—and when it comes time to clean up, you can pick the entire pile up in one lump. Great idea, right? Epworth invented that, along with several other gimmicks that have been reasonably profitable. And I've been taking my percentage right along.

But everything he'd done before was nothing compared to this;

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if my guesstimation was anywhere near correct, my percentage alone would be more than the gross on all of his previous ideas combined.

"Excuse me," Epworth said, pulling a chair over to where he could stand on it and reach the second box.

I composed myself, hoping the dollar signs in my eyes weren't flashing too brightly. "So," I said, "what's the trick? Air jets?" I couldn't see any indications of fakery, but I had to play skeptic—just to be sure, and to put Epworth where I wanted him. Something this big called for more than the usual ten or fifteen percent.

"Try it yourself," he said, tossing it to me.

It didn't rise this time; I caught it just short of my nose. It was heavier than it should have been, weighing maybe five or six pounds, and made of some kind of hard, translucent plastic. I fumbled around with it, looking for a switch.

"Hold it by the ends," Epworth said, "and push."

I did, and the box flexed a bit with a muted click. It suddenly weighed nothing. I released it, and it joined its twin on the ceiling. I stood on my chair, retrieved it, and tried it again . . . and again . . . and again.

Epworth had plopped down in the chair in front of my desk.

"How about *that*?" he asked, taking out one of those little filtered cigars he smokes.

"Karl," I said, tossing the box back to him, "do you realize what we have here?" I knew he did; he was looking smug. "We can—" I stopped. What could we do with it, exactly? The obvious application would be transportation.

"Listen," I said, "how large can you make these? Big enough to carry passengers and freight?"

"Well. . . ." I winced when he said that. I knew he was hunting around for a way to make something bad sound good.

" 'Well', what?"

"The para-magnetic field *is* limited, you understand." He looked around the room, avoiding my eyes. "It obeys the Inverse Square Law with respect to intensity, naturally, and the strength of the field falls off drastically as it is expanded. There is also the problem of a quasi-effect on electron energy levels, which—"

"OK, OK, I believe you." I cut him off before I got lost. Among other faults, Epworth has an annoying habit of assuming that everyone is as knowledgeable as he is. When I first met him, he made vague claims to being a professor of physics somewhere. I

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checked up on him once, out of curiosity, and found him to be a clerk for the local school board. But, maybe he *was* a physics professor once; that would explain all that heavyweight knowledge he throws around, except for the fact that he doesn't always seem to understand what he's talking about. Or maybe he has a direct line to some extraterrestrials who give him ideas. I don't know.

Another idea hit me. "Here's the perfect angle," I said. "Toys. I can see it now—toy flying saucers. Flying dolls. Helicopters. It's perfect!"

Half an hour later I was steering him through the front office and out the door. He had left behind one of the boxes and his signature on a contract that gave us a fifty-fifty split on the gross profits from the anti-gravity boxes.

"I'll get back with you in a week or two, Karl," I said, giving him my Number Two partners-in-crime handshake. "I'll have to make some contacts—work up the best deal, you know—and that will take a few days."

"All right, John. You're the expert." He waved jauntily and I closed the door behind him, hoping he wouldn't have any second thoughts about that contract; it was full of holes.

As things turned out, I had to stall him two extra weeks. The first five toy manufacturers I contacted—including the outfit I had licensed StikSand to—refused to see me, once I mentioned anti-gravity. I kept quiet about it with the sixth one, and bullied my way in to see the R&D chief by threatening to take what I had to the competition.

"I hope this is worth my time, Mr. Higgen," Reynolds, the R&D man, announced as I walked into his office. "I'm very busy this time of year, as—"

I had the box ready, and threw it at him, the way Epworth did to me. It worked. Reynolds gawked and pointed while I climbed on his desk and pulled the box down. Then he found his voice.

"That's great, man!" he said. "How do you do it?"

"Easy," I replied. "It's anti-gravity."

"Sure," he laughed. "Now, how do you do it? Magnets? CO_2? What?"

"It's anti-gravity, as I said. I don't have all the details, but the inventor can supply—"

"*Mister* Higgen. I told you I was busy, and I have no time for jokes. How does this work?"

"Something called a 'para-magnetic field'. I'll be glad to have the inventor come in and give you more information." I could tell

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I was losing it. "But it is authentic," I finished lamely.

"Hah! Look, I don't know what kind of flim-flam you're trying to pull, but it won't work here. Anti-gravity? We already have a flying saucer that does this trick—with CO_2, which is what I suspect you're using, though your gadget works better than ours. But," he leaned toward me, "even if this *is* something original, I couldn't buy it. Not without knowing exactly what it is and how it works."

He crossed the room behind me and opened the door. "Now, unless you've a better explanation than 'anti-gravity', I don't believe we're interested." He looked at me with a taunting smile. "Or maybe you have a perpetual motion machine to sell?"

I left with my tail between my legs.

I tried a different approach with the next company, dispensing with the amateur theatrics and relying on my sales ability. I scripted an entire half-hour presentation, resplendent with qualifiers and positives. An encyclopedia salesman couldn't have done it better; I know—I used to be one.

But the guy I talked to at Arista Toys and Crafts must have been one, too. He picked up on the hype job I was pulling before I got past the qualifiers.

"Before you get too involved here," he said, cutting in on the middle of my opening spiel, "I have one comment. If you have to work this hard to sell whatever you have, it couldn't be worth buying."

I got out of there fast, before he tried to sell *me* something.

The situation grew steadily worse. I had a friend in the technical department at one of the larger studios on the West coast, so I made a quick phone call to him and outlined the idea. He was sympathetic, but. . . .

"Anti-gravity, huh? Sounds great, but we already have that?"

"What?"

"Sure. Air jets, magnets, mirrors, fine wire, and a brace of other gadgets. What it comes down to, John, is this: no one is going to pay good money to do something they already know how to do."

I admitted he had a point. "But this is the real thing! Don't you see?"

"I'm sorry, John," he said. "Really, I am. And I believe you, but I don't have any use for it, and no one else in the business would, either. It's an interesting trick, but . . ."

I made a few half-hearted attempts with some novelty distributors, but the answer was the same: "Interesting, *but*. . . ."

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And, under all the polite refusals, I could detect a strong current of suspicion. People were afraid of being taken by something they couldn't understand.

And, as if matters weren't bad enough, Epworth was hinting at canceling the contract—which he could do, as it contained a non-performance clause.

I must have gotten really desperate about then, because I did something I'd sworn never to do. I got Epworth to set up a design compatible with mass production and, using the operating funds for the business and most of my personal savings, I had fifty thousand of the boxes manufactured.

I had given Epworth a vague outline of a distribution network set up through some wholesalers I had contacts with, but in reality I hadn't done more than think about it. I was so damn set against letting anyone else get ahold of the idea that I would have told Epworth anything to keep the contract. When the boxes were safely in a rented warehouse, though, I began worrying. While I was waiting for them, I had honestly tried to set up the distribution, but no one would work with me. I was running up against the same old credibility gap.

The solution came one evening when I was closing the office. I had stayed late, worrying over the problem, and finally gave up for the night. As I was passing through the outer office on my way to the street door, I caught sight of a magazine my secretary had left behind on her desk.

It was one of those occult things, full of articles on psychic phenomena and related topics aimed at convincing people who already believed in such nonsense that they were right in their beliefs. I picked it up, intending to put it in a drawer, but began leafing through it, out of curiosity.

I was surprised at the quantity of advertising it carried, all of it aimed at the audience, of course. There were ads for everything from ESP amplifiers to courses in levitation. Surprising what people will buy, I thought. You can sell anything, as long as you're reaching the right market. . . .

I didn't go home that night. I stayed at the office writing and re-writing ad copy. The next morning, I sent out for copies of certain types of magazines, and by that afternoon had thirty-one ads placed, to appear in three months. It was a long three months, but well worth the wait.

You've probably seen the ads. Sometimes they run this way:

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SECRETS OF THE ANCIENTS REVEALED!
Mysterious Force used by the
Ancient Architects can be yours!
Only $5.95—

Or, depending upon the publication, we might use something like this:

UFOs
Secret Propulsion Device available.
Actually levitates/floats like real
flying saucer. Interesting, little-
known principle discovered by ancient
scientists, only now brought to light.

Either way, the message is the same: This isn't new or strange; it's just like all the other oddball things you've been finding in the backs of magazines for years. Sort of the same principle that resulted in the early automobiles being tagged "horseless carriages." Call something by a familiar name, or present it in a familiar way, and it will be accepted.

Orders are coming in right and left now, and we're making another production run, trying to cash in on this before some bright boy catches on to us.

One thing has been bothering me, though. There are so many other ads like ours in the backs of those magazines, and I can't help wondering if some of those free energy or teleportation devices are for real. So I've placed a few orders here and there, just to check things out. Who knows? Maybe there are some more inventors out there who could use a good business manager. . . .

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HEROES and HOBGOBLINS

L. Sprague de Camp

Illustrations by Tim Kirk

Heroes and Hobgoblins is a collection of light verse, selected by Mr. de Camp from new and published material. It is illustrated with six color plates by Tim Kirk, with each color plate tipped-in by hand, in the style of turn-of-the-century illustrated books.

L. Sprague de Camp is best known for his science fiction and fantasy novels, such as *Lest Darkness Fall* and *Rogue Queen*, and for his work with the Robert E. Howard "Conan" stories.

Heroes and Hobgoblins will make an excellent addition to any science fiction and fantasy library and is a valued gift. To order, please send a check or money order, or charge to your Mastercharge or Visa chargecard. Please enclose $15.00, plus $1.00 for postage and handling.

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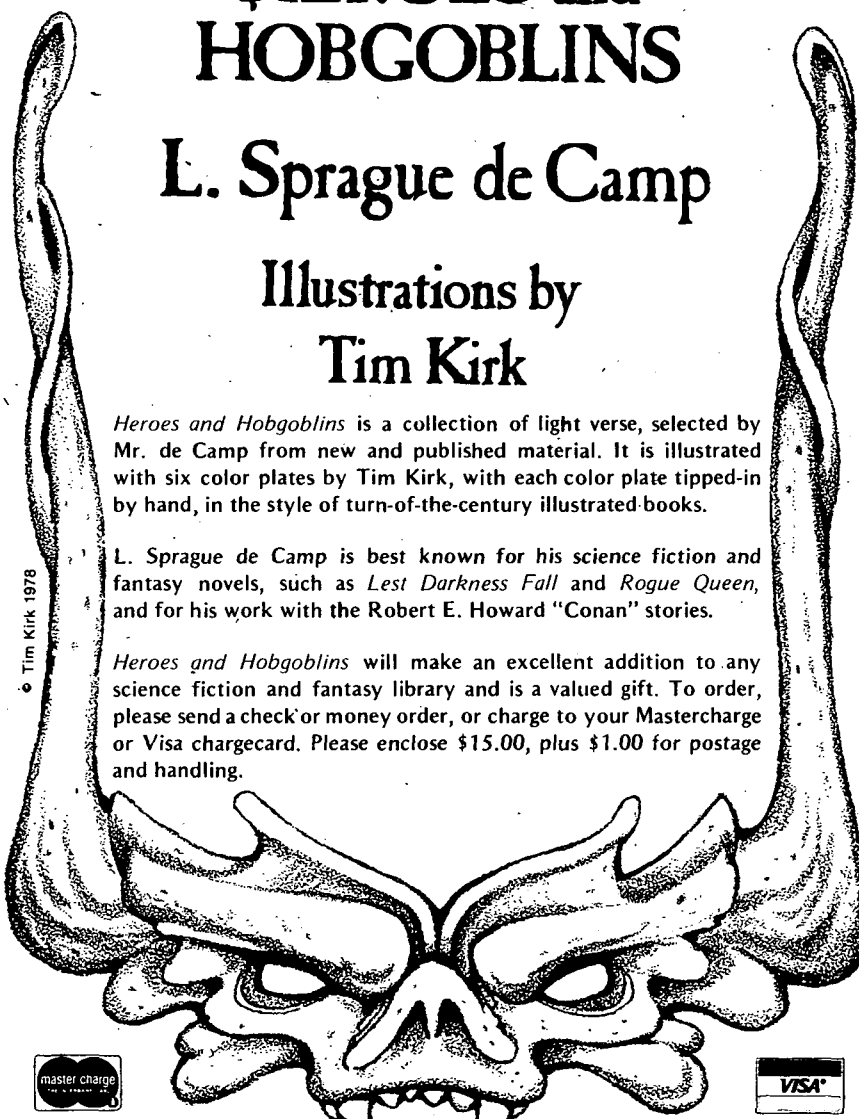

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FRANK KELLY FREAS
by Ginger Kaderabek

An illustrator, according to cover artist Frank Kelly Freas, is "essentially a story-teller who can't type," and a story and its illustration should make a complete package in which the illustration takes the reader into the story.

Freas should know, after 25 years in science fiction illustration and after being awarded ten Hugos by the World Science Fiction Society for "Best Professional Artist." No other science fiction professional has been so honored. In addition, Freas was named "Dean of Science Fiction Artists," a lifetime title, by the Eastern Science Fiction Association.

His long-standing popularity as a science fiction illustrator is "because I'm first and foremost a science fiction reader," Freas said in a recent interview. "I draw to please myself and it pleases the average reader."

Freas, whose work is most closely associated with John W. Campbell's editorship of *Astounding Science Fiction* (later *Analog),* is the author of the critically acclaimed *Frank Kelly Freas, The Art of Science Fiction* (Donning, 1977, $7.95). The book is a sampling of his work in science fiction over the past 25 years, with notes and anecdotes about his career.

Readers of *Mad* magazine will remember his interpretations of Alfred E. Neuman. In addition, Freas was chosen by the Skylab I astronauts to design the uniform patch for the project.

As co-editor with his wife Polly of the new "Starblaze" series of large-sized paperbacks from Donning Company/Publishers, Inc. of Norfolk, Va., Freas now has a chance to test his beliefs about what science fiction readers like best. They are now working on illustrations for the books, which will include original and reprint works chosen by them and designed for the collector of paperback books. The books will reflect the editors' taste for "exciting, well characterized stories," in which the visual element, for Freas the illustrator, will be important, he said.

Freas's next major project is the illustration of Robert Heinlein's *Glory Road* and *Starship Troopers* as heavily illustrated, special limited editions from Heritage Press, Inc. "I've illustrated a lot of Heinlein, but not enough as far as I'm concerned," he said about this project.

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And, of course, he has appearing in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* from its beginning, notably with the sketches of Asimov in each editorial; the cover painting for "Heretic in a Balloon" and the interior drawings for that story and its sequel, "The Witches of Manhattan"; and the cover painting for this issue, for Larry Niven's "Cautionary Tales."

In order to illustrate a story, rather than just "decorate the page," careful study of the work to be illustrated is needed, Freas said.

To illustrate a typical book, he and Polly read the manuscript for the first time "as readers" and then discuss possible scenes for illustration. Freas said, "I never work without the manuscript if I can help it. I did enough of that 25 years ago." In the early days, he often had to drive to editorial offices to read the stories he was illustrating, in order to have the chance to read them at all.

Then Freas reads the book a second time, making notes and simple sketches to determine, in the case of a cover illustration, "what specific idea will best state what the story is about and which will do the most for the story."

At that point, he does four comprehensives, fairly definitive sketches of different ideas the actual size of the book cover. These "comps" are done in enough detail so that the editor can decide, out of four good covers, which suits his purpose best. Generally, Freas commented, if an editor or art director is given three good comps and one not so good, "he'll pick the clinker every time," so Freas tries not to give him that opportunity.

After the editor picks a comp—or a combination of features for several comps—Freas paints the final picture, usually using acrylics. At that point, he tries to make sure he has small details, such as hair color, correct.

Research can be very important in making a science fiction illustration—of an essentially unbelievable subject—believable. However, Freas laughed, "It doesn't always do much good."

Once, when illustrating a story for John Campbell which involved a radiotelescope, Freas said he studied and sketched all the different types of radiotelescopes. "For about three weeks, I was a real expert on the things," he said, but added, "The resultant cover was not worth the work that went into it." Anything which looked generally like a radiotelescope would have been fine for the picture.

At other times, "a little research goes a long way." As an example, he postulated a story about a tramp spaceship among

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the asteroids, whose operators live hand-to-mouth. "I don't have to do much in the way of actual research—I know how a spaceship and spacesuit look." But, he said, it's important for the ship to show some corrosion. The artist should find a pitted piece of metal and paint from it accurately. "This will communicate to the reader on a level of strong communication that you're portraying realism." This factor will help make the science fiction aspects of the scene seem more real. In order to increase this realism, Freas often creates small models from which to paint.

It was with great trepidation that Freas approached *Astounding* editor Campbell, the giant of the field at the time, even though he had sold a good volume of work to other magazines in the field over the preceding few years. Campbell liked his work, assigned him a few black-and-whites, and shortly thereafter he was contacted to do his first *Astounding* cover.

This turned about to be the cover for "The Gulf Between" by Tom Godwin, in the October 1953 *Astounding,* one of Freas's best-known covers. The painting of a bewildered robot with a bloody finger, holding a dead soldier in his hand, was used again for the cover of the 1973 *Astounding: John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology* and eventually evolved into an album cover for the rock group "Queen."

Campbell was the best person to work with in science fiction, Freas said. "He knew his business from the ground up. He was the first to say he didn't know anything about art, but he knew how to communicate. If a picture didn't put the idea across, he didn't want it; and if it did put it across, he would accept some bad drawing."

Campbell's perception in illustration is shown in Freas's oft-told story about grass. To illustrate Clifford Simak's story "Immigrant," he did what he considered one of his finest paintings, of a plain extending to infinity, littered with a path of discarded toys left behind as a man moved through life, and ending with a spaceship on the horizon.

To this masterpiece, Campbell responded, "You know what's wrong with this? It's a perfectly featureless plain. Did you ever see a perfectly featurely plain?" As Freas sputtered in protest, Campbell said, "It needs grass." "Grass! I'll give him grass!" Freas muttered on his way home, and spent all night painting grass on the plain—tall grass, short grass, dry grass, matted grass—and discovered Campbell had been right after all. The addition of grass had made the beautiful picture into a beautiful illustration

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for the story.

Usually, Freas said, the author's reaction to his illustration has been, " 'My God, this is exactly what I had in mind, but I didn't know it until I saw your illustration.' " There have been only a few complaints from authors in 25 years.

A native of upstate New York, who grew up in southern Ontario, Canada, Freas began reading science fiction at age eight, in the old *Argosy Magazine,* and particularly remembers Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Venus" stories. His uncle subscribed to *Argosy,* and although he would not allow the young Freas to borrow the magazines, he did allow him to stop by after school to read them. When sent on train trips to visit relatives, Freas recalled, he would immediately spend 20 cents of his lunch money on a copy of *Astounding.*

Freas began as a commercial artist, selling portraits of his classmates in high school and doing the usual jobs which kids with art talent can get—restaurant signs, newspaper advertisements, and so forth. His first major job was in the Curtiss-Wright public relations department, drawing for the company's trade paper and making posters.

At Catholic University in Washington, D.C., Freas began studying engineering and "bogged down in math." He switched to medicine at Georgetown University, but when he hit organic chemistry, his professors "suggested very firmly that I would do better in art school," Freas laughed. He studied art at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, Pa., and other institutions.

His early background in science was "most assuredly important" to his later success as a science fiction illustrator, Freas said. He said no illustrator can afford to underestimate the importance of a good background in science and history since, if nothing else, such study will save time later in the illustrator's career by teaching him where to do research.

In addition, a good technical art education is invaluable to the illustrator, Freas said, "mainly in the amount of time it saves him in developing his own style." Without training, a new artist will "flounder through techniques invented many years ago. If you get all the tools, you don't have to retrace ground," Freas said. "It's nitwitted to invent a ruler so that you can draw a straight line and equally nitwitted to try to learn to draw a straight line freehanded."

When Freas went to Pittsburgh to go to art school, he became art director of the *Bulletin Index,* a local news magazine. Contacts

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from that job served him when he joined a Pittsburgh ad agency, where he did a large volume of commercial work, particularly for television.

Such work was quite lucrative, but Freas said, "I always wanted to be a purely editorial illustrator and I never gave thought to anything other than science fiction. Of course, I didn't realize at the time how non-lucrative it would be."

At the time, science fiction magazines were paying $10 for one-page illustrations and $35 for double spreads—an hour's work on a television ad paid more. Freas had made several trips to New York, netting only a few illustrations, and therefore decided it was time to move to New York in order to be able to sell his work in person. He had sold his first science fiction cover, a study he was doing in art school, to *Weird Tales* for the November 1950 issue.

In addition to his science fiction work, Freas recently worked on the design for a proposed "Magic Mountain" ride at Kings Dominion in Virginia, and has, over the years, worked on projects ranging from slot machines to billboards, political cartoons and ads, ads for Howard Johnson's and City Service gasoline, and heavy equipment ads. He has done a number of record covers, including the cover for Caedmon's "The Green Hills of Earth" by Heinlein, and also a great deal of religious art, particularly for the Fransiscans.

In the early days, illustrators rarely saw their original works again, but now original illustrative art is making a place for itself on the art market and in museums. Freas's work has been shown in a major retrospective display at the Hayden Planetarium in 1973, at the Buhl Planetarium in Pittsburgh, the University of Maryland Baltimore campus, the University of Pennsylvania, and—most recently—in a major show at the Chrysler Museum at Norfolk, Va. In each case, Freas said, museum officials initially balked at the idea of a science fiction exhibit, but the exhibits have all turned out to be some of the museums' most popular.

On the question of illustration versus fine art, Freas said, "Illustration begins where fine art leaves off." Fine art, he said, is the "kindergarten" of illustration. To be an illustrator, one has to know ink drawing as well as painting, how to organize a picture, and—above all—"how to put what you feel on paper." Then, Freas said, "you're ready to start learning to be an illustrator."

Being a commercial artist is a good background for an illustrator, because in commercial art an artist can learn about repro-

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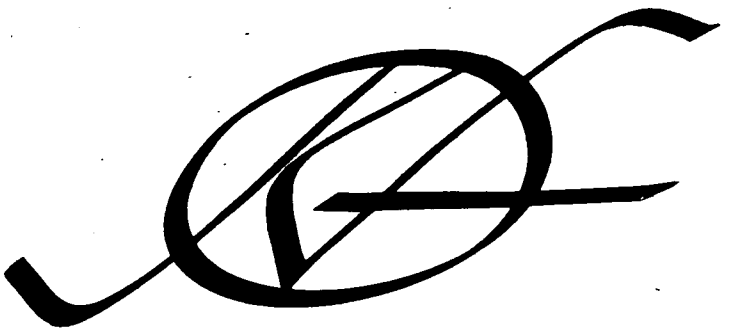
duction. A good illustrator must know what type of drawing will reproduce best on what paper, what colors will change during the reproduction process, and, in general, the technical aspects of making a work reproducable.

At that point, an artist should begin to "learn how to communicate visually the right part of the story to add something to it, not just decorate the page."

What the science fiction illustration field needs now is "not better artists, but better art buyers," Freas said. Editors and art directors often "don't know the difference between good illustration and bad. It's hard to find a man with the talents of a Campbell who is willing to work as an art director." Describing the state of the fields as "fluid," Freas said, "We are at a position right now that if enough good judgement is exercised, we can have a real renaissance in science fiction art. The artists are there, if anyone bothers to use them, but they need firm guidance as well as freedom to use their abilities."

Art buyers, he said, should "bypass the fads and fancies that may be valid for other fields." Science fiction, he said, is a "romantic" literature in that it deals with an emotional understanding of man's relationship to the universe. "Science fiction is assuredly one of the romantic literatures and science fiction art has to be. If it's not, it loses its impact, its magnitude. Abstract expressionism in science fiction illustration is a contradition in terms."

Kelly and Polly Freas have two children: Jerry, a civil service program apprentice and college student, and Jacqui, a medical librarian married to medical student Larry Horman. Both are confirmed and avid science fiction fans.



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MESSAGE TO MYSELF
by Diana L. Paxson

The author now writes educational materials for a living; in the past, she's done everything from school evaluation to career education for Indian children. She began writing to restore her faith in the English language after seeing what professional educators do to it. This story is her second SF sale, but will probably be the first to see print. She is also working on a set of four fantasy novels set in a kingdom in northern California, 500 years in the future. She and her husband, Jon DeCles, have two sons, Ian and Robin.

To: The Captain of the crawler Polyphemus, Ciardan Pioneer Team I, Reichenbach V.

Sir: I would be grateful if you could send this spool on to Ensign Harry Lowe by the next robo. Code it to the A. P. S. Belshazzar, Targen Dock "L", Center. Collect on delivery.
Thanks.

Hello?

God, this is awkward! And I thought I'd have so much to say. . . .

At least the crawler is long enough for me to have a compartment to myself. It's better this way. It was getting to be a strain sitting in there with the Ciardans, and I can't blame them. How do you react to a man's mind in a woman's body—the body of the criminal who nearly killed them all, and the mind of the person who saved them, all in one? No wonder they are confused. Every so often I get an odd feeling myself, like that ripple in perception you feel in Shift. But I know I won't have to take it for long.

They've certainly been kind enough—loungers, an autosnacky, a scriber, audio. Come to think of it, this must be the crew lounge. I hope they don't mind being deprived of it. But of course they got to eat and relax while I was working. Why should I pity them? Too bad I don't feel like eating—could it be the gravity?

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But this stomach shouldn't be troubled by that. The only thing that really interests me here is the scriber. I hope they will send the spool on to you . . . afterwards.

I? You? We? Must really get the pronouns straight if I'm to go on. Because I really am you, of course, and you are me, even though you are floating comfortably weightless somewhere between here and Center, and I am sitting, equally comfortable at almost three gee, in a crawler moving slowly over the virgin dust of Reichenbach V. Still, I *feel* like a separate person, and when you hear these words, I suppose you will too. Shall we agree on a temporary schizophrenia?

I do think it's important for you to hear this. Of course neither of us is aware of having missed anything, except for the few hours of unconsciousness when they took the print. We are one life which has been divided into two equal streams. But one stream is going to continue on, while the other is due to dry up pretty soon (how long? They wouldn't tell us that—long enough to finish the job, they said).

I read-in my formal report on the repair of the Dome Pressure mechanism when I finished the job. I expect the Ciardans will send it to you if you ask. It was a simple enough job, nothing to add to our professional laurels, except that I had to do it with fingers that were too thick, and in a gravity that made the instruments and colloids act as if they were bewitched. Pity they couldn't have left enough of my hostess in here to warn me about that. Certainly the men who died could have handled it easily enough. I wonder what *her* job was, before?

Remember the old joke about the lost scoutcraft that ran out of food and when they were finally picked up there was only one man left—sleek as a ship's cat? That was in the days of the Xirari cult, and before the captain spaced the fellow, he told him, "There were only four Xirari on this ship, and you ate three of them!" I suppose pressure techs are more crucial to colony survival than cultists. But the penalty for doing away with them seems to be similar.

So I want you to hear this. We came out looking for adventure, didn't we? God knows the trip was tame enough, before the distress call from Reichenbach and the rather unusual request they made. Somehow I doubt that anything so exotic will ever happen to you again.

But it's not quite like we thought it was going to be. The work was not very interesting, after all; and since this body is used to

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the gravity, there is no sense of strangeness; and nobody will talk to me, so it's hard to tell what the people are like. But my head gets fuzzy now and then, like a headache that will neither quite come on or go away. And surely I can confess to *you* that I am afraid. . . .

I have just had a horrible thought. What if something happens to *Belshazzar?* What if you never hear this and the two halves of us are never put back together again? What if when this alien brain shuffles off its imprinting at last there is no other "me" out there somewhere, going on about his business?

What if I am really going to die?

This is getting morbid. Better get up, move around. Maybe I can manage a cup of stimo now. If you were here too we could get it on, on that lounger. That would certainly distract me.

Unfortunately I can see my reflection in the view-port, and I'm not your type at all.

Ciardans are built to withstand 3.5 gees—broad as a freighter, with faces that only another Ciardan could love. I can understand why there was no way I/you could have done this job in the body we were born in. Growing up at .8 gee and flipping half-way across the System in free-fall don't give you the physique to function on a place like Ciarda or this godforsaken planet they think they're going to make homey in a few revolves.

Is it worth it?

No—that's the part I don't want to think about for awhile.

This elephant whose body I'm inhabiting must have been pretty hot stuff. They said she'd had three husbands, two of them in this group of pioneers. You would think she would have learned a little tolerance. But when she found out that Number Three was working a little too closely with his team chief, she must have blown her drive. Did she realize that a charge planted in just that spot would wreck the pressure mechanism as well as destroying the whole tech team? As long as she got the two she was after, did she care if the rest of the pressure techs died (quickly) in the same blast? And the rest of the colony (slowly) as the machinery failed? And herself?

Oh, that's right—they told us that before, didn't they? To persuade me that it was only justice. I'm sorry. My head hurts.

Did she suffer, knowing what was going to happen to her? Did they bother to tell her even? Or did they just knock her out, bring her up to the ship, clamp her into the machine and slip the psychprint cube in?

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Why did I volunteer?

The ship racks prints for all essential personnel, including pressure techs, just in case someone should have to be replaced to get us home. They could have used the one we had. But that one was a ship specialist, and I've trained on the new planetary machines. And I thought it would be an experience none of the other first-year men had had!

An ingenious idea—a crazy female wipes out your whole team of techs and the machinery they tended, so you psychprint her into a replacement with the aid of a passing ship. It doesn't matter that soon the print will fade, and then there'll be a mindless nothing left (until someone decides she's using too much air). She deserved to die, and this way she has at least made up for her crime. And the donor happily goes his way—No harm done—

I had to sit down again. I felt dizzy, but it's better now. What was I saying? Have to play back the spool a minute and find out.

No harm done. . . .

No . . . because I am not real, am I? Just a psyche superimposed on a body that has earned death. But it's over for her, and I still have to die—to wait for consciousness and memory to slip away. My head feels as if my skull were splitting. Is she killing me too, or am I killing myself?

The spool is slowing now. Nearly full, I guess. I'll have to turn it off.

Are you there?

Are you still listening?

I keep trying to picture the face I've frowned at in the mirror a million times. What else can't I remember now? I know that I am real. I hurt too much not to be. But are you?

Is this what dying is? The psychprint orientation never mentioned this spreading agony as synapse after synapse flickers out. No one could finish life sane if they knew. . . .

The spool is still turning. I must wipe it before it gets to you—before you know— Whoever picks this up, don't give it to Ensign . . . to. . . .

I can't remember my name!

Oh my God! Stop it! Stop the pain!

No one should have to die twice!

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PUBLIC RELATIONS
by Ginger Kaderabek

Although this is Ms. Kaderabek's first fiction sale, she has been in the newspaper business ever since she entered college at the age of 16. Currently, she is the lifestyle editor of a suburban Atlanta newspaper. Now 24, her hobbies include writing, reading, and 'projects' such as stained glass and macramé. For the benefit of all the inquisitive hordes Out There, she's informed us that 'Kaderabek' is a Bohemian name.

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"There's a weirdo on line two. It must be for you, Williams," the managing editor yelled.

"Yeah, that's my beat, all right—freaks, weirdos and marching morons," Anne Williams muttered, punching the phone button savagely and breaking her fingernail in the process. She tucked the receiver under her ear and said, "May I help you?"

"I can certainly help you. I've got a great story that you should put in your newspaper. Also, I think you'll want a picture, maybe of me and my crew standing by our spaceship with our helmets under our right arms," said a squeaky voice.

"Well, sir, I really appreciate your thinking of the *Star,* but we do have a small staff and I don't think anyone is free," Anne said smoothly in her stock "leave me alone, I've got enough trouble" mode, while some part of her mind assimilated what the voice had said. "Did you say a picture in front of your spaceship?"

"Yes, unless you think an interior shot would be better. We do have a specially designed control room which I'm sure would be interesting to your readers."

"This is certainly a persistent one, anyway," Anne thought, and—under the company policy of never being rude, even to crazy people—she shifted into phase two. "We are, as you know, a locally oriented paper. Do you live in the area?"

"I'm actually from the planet Quixyl, you understand, but I thought our landing would be of local interest since we did land in a local alfalfa field, one belonging to an H.A. Smith, according to the mailbox. We are keeping our invisibility screens up, naturally, to prevent damage by small boys and other indigenous creatures."

"Naturally, you would keep up your invisibility screen, but since we have had no complaints from local citizens, I don't know whether there would be enough local interest to warrant a story," Anne said, thinking, "There, that ought to do it. Maybe I can get this copy out before deadline after all."

"Now, this story is eventually going to be important to the whole world, but we thought that, as the local paper, you deserved the first crack at it. However, if you're not interested, we can always take it to the *Herald-Citizen,*" said the voice, taking on the familiar, ingratiating tones of a public relations man.

"I really don't know what to tell you, sir. I'm sure it would make an interesting story, but I really need to ask my editor about it. Can you hold a moment?"

"Certainly."

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"Boy, did you hand me a loony, Bill. He insists that we should do a story about his spaceship which is now invisible in the middle of an alfalfa field. He threatens to give the story to the *Herald-Citizen* and I told him I would ask an editor about it. How about it, editor?"

"What do you think? Do I look crazy?"

"Not as crazy as this guy. I wonder if the psychiatrists know about him. He sounds like a PR man gone berserk."

"Just get him off the phone and get back to work. We've got a paper to get out."

Taking the phone off hold, she said, "I'm sorry you had to wait, sir. I hate to tell you this, but my editor is not really interested in your story. I wish I could help, but . . ." Her voice trailed off in practiced insincerity.

"But you've got to print this story! I tell you, it's of vital importance to me and my crew. Each of them has promised his nest mates that he would bring home clippings of our triumphal landing," said the caller, considerably less cocky.

"As I said, sir, I'm really sorry, but I just can't talk to you now because I'm on a deadline. Is there a phone where you can be reached?"

"I'm calling from a pay telephone—fortunately, our portable matter translator was able to reproduce your coins—but I'm sure I can hear the phone when you call."

"All right. And what's that number?"

"It's 832-9309."

"And what did you say your name was?"

"Captain Quondam."

"Okay, that's Captain Quondam of the spaceship at 832-9309. Thank you for calling, sir." Anne put the receiver down firmly and, after checking the calendar briefly to see whether it was a full moon, crumpled the paper with the phone number, threw it in the general direction of the wastebasket, and bent over her copy again.

§ § §

"God, what a day!" Anne said in tones of relief as she settled down over her lunch of cheese crackers and Coke and picked out typos in the still-damp first edition. She heard the city desk phone shrill and Bill yelled, "Line one, Williams. I think it's the same wacko." "Why me," Anne moaned as she leisurely finished a cracker and reached toward the phone.

"I thought you were going to call me back. I've been sweltering

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in this hot sun for hours, trying to make sure I got your call. The matter translator is not designed for these temperatures. It hiccoughed and gave me 27 Indian head pennies before I could get another dime out of it," the squeaky voice said.

"Well, we all have our problems," Anne said, choking on her Coke and gesturing frantically at a passing reporter.

"What can I do for you?"

"You can come out here and get a picture of our spaceship before we run out of fuel running the invisibility screen."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I think our photographer is out to lunch just now. Couldn't you take your own pictures and mail them to us?" Anne replied, while mouthing at the reporter, "Yell for me." He seemed exasperatingly slow to understand the problem, so Anne continued to stall the squeaky voiced caller.

"Where did you say you had landed, sir?"

"Out on Oswego Road, a couple of miles down from where the Baptist church used to be."

"For an alien, you seem to have a remarkable knowledge of the area."

"Why thank you. I pride myself on the careful preparations I make on each and every mission. How do you like my English? I learned it studying Dale Carnegie course tapes."

"It's just wonderful," Anne muttered. "They don't pay me enough for all this."

"What did you say?"

"Never mind."

Meanwhile, the reporter had finally gotten the message and yelled, "Williams, you better get over here quick."

"Oops, that's the boss calling. I've got to go. Thank you so much for calling the *Star*," Anne said quickly while simultaneously hanging up the phone. She turned to the reporter and said, "Thanks, you're a lifesaver. That crazy's been after me all day and I've got to be at an interview at two."

§ § §

As she dragged back in that afternoon, the night man said, "Oh, Anne. I thought you had gone home. Some guy called for you and I gave him your home number. Sounded like a flack."

"Did he have a squeaky voice?"

"Yep. A really strange voice."

"Thanks a lot. I was hoping he had died. This day has gone from bad to worse and I'm going home to drink it off. Try not to give out my home number more than two or three times tonight."

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"Okay. Have a good evening."

§ § §

As Anne trudged up the stairs to her third floor apartment, Mrs. Ellis, the lady who lived downstairs with 137 plants, a Saint Bernard, and recordings of the Latin Mass, stopped her on the landing. "You're with the newspaper, honey. Can't you get me some better coverage of my garden club? All we ever get is one of those little listings. What we really need is for someone to come out and cover the meetings."

"Now, Mrs. Ellis, I've told you before that we can't do that unless you're having a speaker who would be interesting to everyone. You know we can't cover everything."

"You could if you would all work a little harder instead of drinking all night. Besides, next week we're having an expert on the culture of Phaelenopsis orchids. Surely everyone is interested in that."

"Isn't that my phone ringing? I'd better go catch it." Of course, it wasn't her phone, but Mrs. Ellis was a bit deaf and she'd had enough for one day.

§ § §

Just as she was beginning to again think that there was a bit too much orange juice in her vodka, the doorbell rang. "Rats, it's Mrs. Ellis again." She pulled on a robe and walked to the door. She opened it. It was a little green man.

"I hate to bother you at home, but I had to get through to you how important this story is to me and my people," said the voice of the day's phone calls.

"You are a figment of my imagination," Anne said, sitting back down and pouring considerably more alcohol in her glass.

"But you don't understand," the little man said in tones of growing desperation, hopping from one foot to another and spinning his tail. "We haven't got much time."

"Time for what?" Anne asked dreamily, thinking, "This is interesting. I've never even seen a little pink elephant and now with a little vodka, I get a little green man with big ears."

"Time to get our story in the newspaper. Who else can I talk to in order to get it in? The editor? The publisher? What if I were to buy a big advertisement?"

Struggling to focus on the excited being, Anne said, "If we did a story, I'd be the one to write it. I'm the feature writer—freaks, weirdos, marching morons, and—I suppose—Martians or whatever you are."

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"I'm a Quixylian, you fool. What do I have to do to get you to write a simple story about an alien ship landing in your coverage area?"

"Had you thought about pointing your ray gun at me and saying 'Take me to your leader'?"

"Rule 14-A under 'dealing with indigenous population' specifically forbids the use of force in the initial contact period."

"Oh, sure, it would say that. But I still don't understand what the hurry is. Why don't you have a drink and relax?"

"It's far too complicated to explain to a simple being such as yourself, but I must have a story in the next issue of the paper. Why don't you get out your notebook and take a few notes?"

"No way. I'm off work. They could be knifing a guy right outside of that window and I'd just tell the police reporter about it in the morning. Talk to the night man."

"I did. He told me I would have to talk to you and told me where you were."

"He would, that turkey."

"Suppose I offered you your own matter translator," the alien said craftily. "You could be rich."

"Oh, no," said Anne with drunken cautiousness. "I've read some science fiction. Everything I made would turn into rocks or frogs or something as soon as you left. Besides, there's a company policy against taking gifts."

The little green man shrieked in frustration, spun his tail until all that was visible was a blur, and disappeared, leaving a small green cloud.

Anne brushed the cloud toward the air conditioning vent, took two aspirins to ward off a hangover, and went to bed.

§ § §

She had something of a hangover anyway, or at least a certain fragility about the ears. She also had a conviction that she needed either to stop drinking or to get out of the newspaper business. She had had that conviction before, but nothing had ever come of it.

§ § §

A few days later, she was cold sober when there was another knock at her door. She opened the door. It was a furry pink man.

"Ms. Williams, I presume."

"Won't you come in," Anne said, suddenly reassured that it was the business which had unhinged her reason, not the drinking after all. It would be harder to give up drinking.

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"I am Zhan, an investigator for the Galactic Empire's Conquest Enforcement Agency. I am here about the little matter of a being named Quondam who was here recently, I believe."

"Of course, Zhan. It's nice meeting you. Would you like a drink. As soon as I finish this little talk with you, I'm moving to Australia and getting a new start."

"That's wonderful, I'm sure. All I really need is your signature on this statement that he contacted you but that no account of his landing was ever published in your paper."

"Certainly, certainly. Anything to cooperate with an officer of the law. Can you tell me what this is all about?"

"Just between you and me, you certainly did your planet a favor. I certainly would not want to live on one of Quondam's planets. He's very hard on the help—whips, chains, electrotorture machines, all that. And the conditions! A planet hardly ever qualifies for a Certificate of Civilization after Quondam gets through with it," the creature said in the accents of a British civil servant.

"I would agree that he was less than polite at times, but what exactly did I do?"

"Well, you know, you have to have rules of conquest. You can't have every petty dictator out conquering planets without going through channels. It would be anarchy, simply anarchy, my dear young lady," he said, curling his ear-tip fur between his fingers. "And of course an important regulation is Rule 12-F, 'Warning the Populace'."

"Of course! How stupid of me! But I've forgotten the exact wording of that particular rule."

"You should remember it, my dear, since it applies to your profession. However, here it is: 'Upon landing, the leading being of the vehicle must inform the native population of his intent to conquer the planet and this notification must be made using the nearest available general communications medium. Notice must appear within one planetary revolution in the first communications medium contacted and copies of such notification shall be kept on file in the Galactic Archives as proof of compliance with this statute. Failure to obtain such notice within the specified time shall result in the immediate revocation of Forms 8912-D and 8914, Permit to Plunder and Permit to Conquer.'

"The provision was designed to give the natives warning and the so-called 'fighting chance' in which the Empress, who is rather naïve, believes. Naturally, most commanders do prefer to

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land near smaller towns, in order to get well under way before major forces can be mobilized. Usually a few local constabulary are not enough to fight them off, although there was a case. . . . Never mind that, just sign that form so that I can be on my way. I never can bear to remain very long on this class of planet."

"Does all that mean that just because I didn't write that story, Quondam was not allowed to conquer Earth?"

"Of course, my dear. I told you, everyone must go through all the proper channels."

As Anne signed the document, the furry pink creature began to waver out of focus. "Wait a minute. When will the next conquest permit be issued for this planet?"

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear," the voice came faintly. "There's always so much paperwork in these cases. It could be several millennia."

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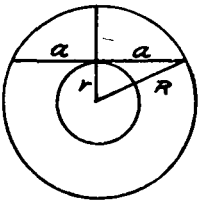
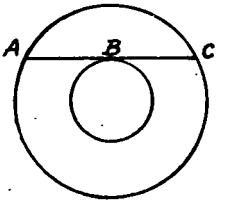
THE FIRST SOLUTION TO NEPTUNE'S GREAT RING
(from page 26)





Let a be each half of the chord AC, let r be the radius of the inner circle, and let R be the radius of the outer circle. (See illustration.)

A circle's area is pi times the square of its radius. Therefore the area of the small circle is πr^2, and the area of the large circle is πR^2. The ring's area, the difference between the areas of the two circles, is $\pi R^2 - \pi r^2$, or $\pi(R^2 - r^2)$.

Since a and r are two legs of a right triangle, with R as its hypotenuse, we know (from the Pythagorean theorem) that $a^2 + r^2 = R^2$. Rearranging terms gives $a^2 = R^2 - r^2$. This allows us to substitute a^2 for $(R^2 - r^2)$ in the previous equation. The startling result is that the two unknown terms, r and R, drop out, leaving the simple formula πa^2. Since $a = 100{,}000$ kilometers, the area of the ring is pi times $100{,}000^2$, or 31,415,926,535.89+ square kilometers.

Captain Quank worked all this out without speaking while Lieutenant Flarp mixed a pitcher of dry Martian martinis.

"I've got it!" shouted the captain. "The ring's area is . . ."

"Don't tell me," interrupted the lieutenant. "Let me guess. It is—" He paused to check a number he had jotted on the back of an envelope. "—31,415,926,535.8979+ square kilometers."

"Flarp, there are times when you amaze me. You're absolutely right. But how did you do all that algebra in your head?"

"I didn't do any algebra. All I needed was the formula pi-r-squared. I've never forgotten it because when I was a boy, and told my father I'd learned it in school, he said, 'Son, your teacher is crazy. Pie are round.' "

Second question: How did Lieutenant Flarp solve the problem so easily? See page 155.

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DANCE BAND ON THE *TITANIC*

by Jack Chalker

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Mr. Chalker, doing business as Mirage Press, publishes books about fantasy and science fiction. He teaches in the Baltimore public schools, is becoming known as a SF novelist—Midnight at the Well of Souls, *from del Rey Books, is one he's particularly happy with—and chases ferryboats as a hobby.*

The young woman was committing suicide again on the lower afterdeck. They'd told me I'd get used to it, but after four times I could still only pretend to ignore it, pretend that I didn't hear the body go over, hear the splash, and the scream as she was sucked into the screws. It was all too brief, and becoming all too familiar.

When the scream was cut short, as it always was, I continued walking forward, toward the bow. I would be needed there to guide the spotlight with which the captain would have to spot the buoys to get us all safely into Southport harbor.

It was a clear night; once at the bow I could see the stars in all their glory, too numerous to count or spot familiar constellations. It's a sight that's known and loved by all those who follow the sea, and it had a special meaning for us, who manned the *Orcas,* for the stars were immutable, the one unchanging part of our universe.

I checked the lines, the winch, and ties in the chained-off portion of the bow, then notified the captain by walkie-talkie that all was ready. He gave me "Very well," and told me that we'd be on the mark in five minutes. This gave me a few moments to relax, adjust my vision to the darkness, and look around.

The bow is an eerie place at night, for all its beauty; there is an unreality about a large ferryboat in the dark. Between where I stood on station and the bridge superstructure towering above me there was a broad area always crowded with people in warm weather. That bridge—dominating the aft field of vision, a ghostly, unlit white-gray monolith, reflecting the moonlight with an almost unreal cast and glow. A silent, spinning radar mast on top, and the funnel, end-on, in back of the bridge, with its wing supports and mast giving it some futuristic cast, only made the scene

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more alien, more awesome.

I glanced around at the people on deck. Not as many as usual, but then it was very late, and there was a chill in the air. I saw a few familiar faces, and there was some lateral shift in focus on a number of them, indicating that I was seeing at least three levels of reality that night.

Now, that last is kind of hard to explain. I'm not sure whether I understand it, either, but I well remember when I applied for this job, and the explanations I got then.

Working deck on a ferryboat is a funny place for a former English teacher, anyway. But, while I'd been, I think, a good teacher, I was in constant fights with the administration over their lax discipline, stuff-shirt attitudes toward teaching and teachers, and the like. The educational system isn't made for mavericks; it's designed to make everyone conform to bureaucratic ideals which the teacher is supposed to exemplify. One argument too many, I guess, and there I was, an unemployed teacher in a time when there were too many teachers. So, I drifted—no family, no responsibilities. I'd always loved ferryboats—raised on them, loved them with the same passion some folks like trains and trolley cars and such—and when I found an unskilled job opening on the old Delaware ferry, I took it. The fact that I was an ex-teacher actually helped; ferry companies like to hire people who relate well to the general public. After all, deck duty is hectic when the ferry's docking or docked, but for the rest of the time you just sort of stand there, and every tourist and traveller in the world wants to talk. If you aren't willing to talk back and enjoy it, forget ferry runs.

And I met Joanna. I'm not sure if we were ever in love, but we got along. No, on second thought, I shouldn't kid myself—I *did* love her, although I'm pretty sure I was just convenient from her point of view. For a while things went smoothly—I had a job I liked, and we shared rent. She had a little daughter she doted on, and we hit it off, too.

And in a space of three weeks my neat little complacent world ended. First she threw that damned party while I was working, and a cigarette or something was left, and the apartment burned. They saved her—but not her little girl. I tried to comfort her, tried to console her, but I guess I was too full of my own life and self-importance, I didn't see the signs. The woman hanged herself, again while I worked the boat.

A week after that the damned bridge-tunnel put the ferry out of

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business, too.

I was alone, friendless, jobless, and feeling guilty as hell. I seriously thought about ending it all myself about then, maybe going down to the old ferryboat and blowing it and me to hell in one symbolic act of togetherness. But, then, just when I'd sunk to the depths, I got this nice, official-looking envelope in the mail from something called the Bluewater Corporation, Southport, Maine. Just a funny logo, some blue water with an odd, misty-looking shape of a ship in it.

"Dear Mr. Dalton," it read. "We have just learned of the closing of the Delaware service, and we are in need of some experienced ferry people. After reviewing your qualifications, we believe that you will fit nicely into our company, which, we guarantee, will not be put out of business by bridge or tunnel. If this prospect interests you, please come to Southport terminal at your earliest convenience for a final interview. Looking forward to seeing you soon, I remain, sincerely yours, Herbert V. Penobscot, Personnel Manager, Bluewater Corp."

I just stood there staring at the thing for I don't know how long. A ferry job! That alone should have excited me, yet I wondered about it, particularly that line about "reviewing my qualifications" and "final interview". Funny terms. I could see why they'd look for experienced people, and all ferry folk knew when a line was closed and might look for their own replacements there, but—why me? I hadn't applied to them, hadn't ever heard of them or their line—or, for that matter, of Southport, Maine either. Obviously they preselected their people—very odd for this particular business.

I scrounged up an old atlas and tried to find it. The letterhead said **"Southport—St. Michael—The Island"**, but I could find nothing about any such place in the atlas or an almanac. If the letterhead hadn't been so damned convincing, I'd have sworn somebody was putting me on. As it was, I had nothing else to do, and it beat drinking myself to a slow death, so I hitchhiked up.

It wasn't easy finding Southport, I'll tell you. Even people in nearby towns had never heard of it. The whole town was about a dozen houses, a seedy ten-unit motel, a hot dog stand, and a very small ferry terminal with a standard but surprisingly large ferry ramp and parking area.

I couldn't believe the place warranted a ferry when I saw it; you had to go about sixty miles into the middle of nowhere on a road the highway department had deliberately engineered to miss

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some of the world's prettiest scenery and had last paved sometime before World War II just to get there.

There was a light on in the terminal, so I went in. A gray-haired man, about fifty, was in the ticket office, and I went over and introduced myself. He looked me over carefully, and I knew I didn't present a very good appearance.

"Sit down, Mr. Dalton," he offered in a tone that was friendly but businesslike. "I've been expecting you. This really won't take long, but this final interview includes a couple of strange questions. If you don't want to answer any of them, feel free, but I must ask them nonetheless. Will you go along with me?"

I nodded, and he fired away. It was the damndest job interview I'd ever had. He barely touched on my knowledge of ferries except to ask if it mattered that the *Orcas* was a single-bridge, twin-screw affair, not a double-ender like I'd been used to. It still loaded on one end and unloaded on the other, though, through a raised bow, and a ferry was a ferry to me and I told him so.

Most of the questions were on my personal life, my attitudes. Like this one: "Have you ever contemplated or attempted suicide?"

I jumped. "What's *that* have to do with anything?" I snapped. After all this I was beginning to see why the job was still open.

"Just answer the question," he responded, almost embarrassed. "I told you I had to ask them all."

Well, I couldn't figure out what this was all about, but I finally decided, what the hell, I had nothing to lose and it was a beautiful spot.

"Yes," I told him. "Thought about it, anyway." And I told him why. He just nodded thoughtfully, jotted a little something on a preprinted form, and continued. His next question was worse.

"Do you now believe in ghosts, devils, and demonic forces?" he asked in the same tone that he would ask whether I did windows.

I couldn't suppress a chuckle. "You mean the ship's haunted?"

He didn't smile back. "Just answer the question, please."

"No," I responded. "I'm not very religious."

Now there was a wisp of a smile there. "And suppose, with your hard-nosed rationalism, you ran into one? Or a whole bunch of them?" He leaned forward, smile gone. "Even an entire shipload of them?"

It was impossible to take this seriously. "What kind of ghosts?" I asked him. "Chain rattlers? White sheets? Foul forms spouting hateful gibberish?"

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He shook his head negatively. "No, ordinary people, for the most part. Dressed a little odd, perhaps; talking a little odd perhaps, but not really very odd at all: Nice folks, typical passengers."

Cars were coming in now, and I glanced out the window at them. Ordinary-looking cars, ordinary-looking people—campers, a couple of tractor-trailer rigs, like that. Lining up. A U.S. customs man came from the direction of the motel and started talking to some of them.

"They don't look like ghosts to me," I told my interviewer.

He sighed. "Look, Mr. Dalton. I know you're an educated man. I have to go out and start selling fares now. She'll be in in about forty minutes, and we've only got a twenty-minute layover. When she's in, and loads, go aboard. Look her over. You'll have free rein of the ship. Take the complete round trip, all stops. It's about four hours over, twenty minutes in, and a little slower back. Don't get off the ship, though. Keep an open mind. If you're the one for the *Orcas,* and I think you are, we'll finish our talk when you get back." He got up, took out a cash drawer and receipt load, and went to the door, then turned back to me. "I hope you are the one," he said wearily. "I've interviewed over three hundred people and I'm getting sick of it."

We shook hands on that cryptic remark, and I wandered around while he manned his little booth and processed the cars, campers, and trucks. A young woman came over from one of the houses and handled the few people who didn't have cars, although how they ever got to Southport I was at a loss to know.

The amount of business was nothing short of incredible. St. Michaels was in Nova Scotia, it seemed, and there were the big runs by CN from a couple of places and the Swedish one out of Portland to compete for any business. The fares were reasonable but not merely cheap enough to drive this far out of your way for, and to get to Southport you *had* to drive out of the way.

I found a general marine atlas of the Fundy region in his office and looked at it. Southport made it, but just barely. No designation of it as a ferry terminal, though, and no funny line showing a route.

For the life of me I couldn't find a St. Michael, Nova Scotia—nor a St. Clement's Island, either—the mid-stop that the schedule said it made.

And then there was the blast of a great air horn, and I rushed out for my first look at the *Orcas*—and I was stunned.

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That ship, I remember thinking, *has no right to be here. Not here, not on this run.*

It was *huge*—all gleaming white, looking brand-new, more like a cruise ship than a ferryboat. I counted three upper decks, and, as I watched, a loud clanging bell sounded electrically on her and her enormous bow lifted, revealing a grooved raising ramp, something like the bow of an old LST. It docked with little trouble, and the ramp came down slowly, mating with the ferry dock, revealing space for well over a hundred cars and trucks, with small side ramps for a second level available if needed.

It was close to sundown on a weekday, but they loaded over fifty vehicles, including a dozen campers and eight big trucks. Where had they all come from, I wondered. And why?

I walked on with the passengers, still in something of a daze, and went up top. The lounges were spacious and comfortable, the seats padded and reclining. There was a large cafeteria, a newsstand, and a very nice bar at the stern of passenger deck 2. The next deck had another lounge section, and a couple of dozen staterooms up front, while the top level had crew's quarters and a solarium.

It was fancy; and, after it backed out, lowered its bow, and started pouring it on after clearing the harbor lights, the fastest damned thing I could remember, too. Except for the slight swaying and the rhythmic thrumming of the twin diesels you hardly knew you were moving. It was obviously using enormous stabilizers.

The sun was setting, and I walked through the ship, just looking and relaxing. As darkness fell and the shoreline receded into nothingness, I started noticing some very odd things, as I'd been warned.

First of all, there seemed to be a whole lot more people on board than I'd remembered loading, and there certainly hadn't been any number staying on from the last run. They all looked real and solid enough, and very ordinary, but there was something decidedly weird about them, too.

Many seemed to be totally unaware of each other's existence, for one thing. Some seemed to shimmer occasionally, others were a little blurred or indistinct to my eyes no matter how I rubbed them.

And, once in a while, they'd walk through each other.

Yes, I'm serious. One big fellow in a flowered aloha shirt and brown pants carrying a tray of soft drinks from the cafeteria to

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his wife and three kids in the lounge didn't seem to notice this woman dressed in a white tee shirt and jeans walking right into him, nor did she seem aware of him, either.

And they met, and I braced for the collision and spilled drinks—and it didn't happen. They walked right *through* each other, just as if they didn't exist, and continued obliviously on. Not one drop of soda was spilled, not one spot of mustard was splotched.

There were other things, too. Most of the people were dressed normally for summer, but occasionally I'd see people in fairly heavy coats and jackets. Some of the fashions were different, too—some people were overdressed in old-fashioned styles, others wildly underdressed, a couple of the women frankly wearing nothing but the bottoms of string bikinis and a see-through short cape of some kind.

I know I couldn't take my eyes off them for a while, until I got the message that they knew they were being stared at and didn't particularly like it. But they were generally ignored by the others.

There were strange accents, too. Not just the expected Maine twang and Canadian accents, or even just the French Canadian accents—those were normal. But there were some really odd ones, ones where I picked out only a few words, which sounded like English, French, Spanish, and Nordic languages all intermixed and often with weird results.

And men with pigtails and long, braided hair, and women with shaved heads or occasionally beards.

It was weird.

Frankly, it scared me a little, and I found the purser and introduced myself.

The officer, a good-looking young man named Gifford Hanley, a Canadian by his speech, seemed delighted that I'd seen all this, and not the least bit disturbed.

"Well, well, well!" he almost beamed. "Maybe we've found our new man at last, eh? Not bloody soon enough, either! We've been working short-handed for too long and it's getting to the others."

He took me up to the bridge—one of the most modern I'd ever seen—and introduced me to the captain and helmsman. They all asked me what I thought of the *Orcas* and how I liked the sea, and none of them would answer my questions on the unusual passengers.

Well, there *was* a St. Clement's Island. A big one, too, from the

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looks of it, and a fair amount of traffic getting off and wanting on. Some of the vehicles that got on were odd, too; many of the cars looked unfamiliar in design, the trucks very odd, and there were even several horse-drawn wagons!

The island had that same quality as some of the passengers, too. It seemed never to be quite in focus just beyond the ferry terminal, and lights seemed to shift, so that where I thought there were houses or a motel suddenly they were somewhere else, of a different intensity. I was willing to swear that that motel had two stories; later it seemed over on the left, and four stories high, then farther back, still later, and single-storied.

Even the lighthouse as we sped out of the harbor changed; one time it looked very tall with a house at its base; then, suddenly, it was short and tubby, then an automated light that seemed to be out in the water, with no sign of an island.

This continued for most of the trip. St. Michael looked like a carbon copy of Southport, the passengers and vehicles as bizarre, and there seemed to be a lot of customs men in different uniforms dashing about, totally ignoring some vehicles while clearing others.

The trip back was equally strange. The newsstand contained some books and magazines that were odd to say the least, and papers with strange names and stranger headlines.

This time there were even Indians aboard, speaking odd tongues. Some looked straight out of *The Last of the Mohicans,* complete with wild haircut, others dressed from little to heavy, despite the fact that it was July and very warm and humid.

And, just before we were to make the red and green channel markers and turn into Southport, I saw the girl die for the first time.

She was dressed in red t-shirt, yellow shorts, and sandals; she had long brown hair, was rather short and overweight, and wore oversized granny glasses.

I wasn't paying much attention, really, just watching her looking over the side at the wake, when, before I could even cry out, she suddenly climbed up on the rail and plunged in, very near the stern.

I screamed, and heard her body hit the water and then heard her howl of terror as she dropped close enough in that the prop wash caught her, tucked her under, and cut her to pieces.

Several people on the afterdeck looked at me quizzically, but only one or two seemed to realize that a girl had just died.

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There was little I could do, but I ran back to the purser, breathless.

He just nodded sadly.

"Take it easy, man," he said gently. "She's dead, and there's no use going back for the body. Believe me, we *know*. It won't be there."

I was shocked, badly upset. "How do you know that?" I snapped.

"Because we did it every time the last four times she jumped, and we never found her body then, either," he replied sadly.

I had my mouth open, ready to retort, to say *something;* but he got up, put on his officer's hat and coat, said, "Excuse me, I have to tend to the unloading," and walked out.

As soon as I got off the ship it was like some sort of dreamy fog had lifted from me. Everything looked suddenly bright and clear, and the people and vehicles looked normal. I made my way to the ferry terminal.

When they'd loaded and the ship was gone again, I waited for Mr. McNeil, the ticket agent, to return to his office. It looked much the same, really, but a few things seemed different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there *was* something odd—like the paneling had been rosewood before, and was now walnut. Small things, but nagging ones.

McNeil, the ticket-agent, came back after seeing the ship clear. It ran almost constantly, according to the schedule.

I glanced out the window as he approached, and noticed uniformed customs men checking out the debarked vehicles. They seemed to have a different uniform than I'd remembered.

McNeil came in, and I got another shock. He had a beard.

No, it was the same man, all right. No question about it. But the man I'd talked to less than nine hours earlier had been clean-shaven.

I turned to where the navigation atlas lay, just where I'd put it, still open to the Southport page.

It showed a ferry line from Southport to a rather substantial St. Clements Island now. But nothing to Nova Scotia.

I turned to the bearded McNeil, who was watching me with some mild amusement in his eyes.

"What the *hell* is going on here?" I demanded.

He went over and sat down in his swivel chair. "Want the job?" he asked. "It's yours if you do."

I couldn't believe his attitude. "I want an explanation, damn it!" I fumed.

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He chuckled. "I told you I'd give you one if you wanted. Now, you'll have to bear with me, since I'm only repeating what the Company tells me, and I'm not sure I have it all clear myself."

I sat down in the other chair. "Go ahead," I told him.

He sighed. "Well, let's start off by saying that there's been a Bluewater Corporation ferry on this run since the mid-1800s—steam passenger and freight service at first, of course. The *Orcas* is the eleventh ship in the service, put on a year and a half ago."

He reached over, grabbed a cigarette, lit it, and continued.

"Well, anyway, it was a normal operation until about 1910 or so. That's when they started noticing that their counts were off, that there seemed to be more passengers than the manifests called for, different freight, and all that. As it continued, the crews started noticing more and more of the kind of stuff you saw, and things got crazy for them, too. Southport was a big fishing and lobstering town then—nobody does that any more, the whole economy's the ferry.

"Well, anyway, one time this crewman goes crazy, says the woman in his house isn't his wife. A few days later another comes home to find he has four kids—and he was only married a week before. And so on."

I felt my skin start to crawl slightly.

"So, they send some big shots up. The men are absolutely nuts, but *they* believe in what they claim. Soon everybody who works the ship is spooked, and this can't be dismissed. The experts go for a cruise and can't find anything odd, but now two of the crewmen claim that it *is* their wife, or their kid, or somesuch. Got to be a pain, though, getting crewmen. We finally had to center on loners—people without family, friends, or close personal ties. It kept getting worse each trip. Had a hell of a time keeping men for a while, and that's why it's so hard to recruit new ones."

"You mean the trip drives you crazy?" I asked unbelievingly.

He chuckled. "Oh, no. *You're* sane. It's the rest of 'em. That's the problem. And it gets worse and worse each season. But the trip's *extremely* profitable. So we try and match the crew to the ship, and hope they'll accept it. If they do, it's one of the best damned ferry jobs there is."

"But what causes it?" I managed. "I mean—I saw people dressed outlandishly. I saw other people walk *through* each other! I even saw a girl commit suicide, and nobody seemed to notice!"

McNeil's face turned grim. "So that's happened again. Too bad. Maybe one day there'll be some chance to save her."

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"Look," I said, exasperated. "There must be some explanation for all this. There *has* to be!"

The ticket agent shrugged and stubbed out the cigarette.

"Well, some of the company experts studied it. They say nobody can tell for sure, but the best explanation is that there are a lot of different worlds—different Earths, you might say—all existing one on top of the other, but you can't see any one except the one you're in. Don't ask me how that's possible or how they came up with it, it just *is,* that's all. Well, they say that in some worlds folks don't exist at all, and in others they are different places or doing different things—like getting married to somebody else or somesuch. In some, Canada's still British, in some she's a republic, in others she's a fragmented batch of countries, and in one or two she's part of the U.S. Each one of these places has a different history."

"And this one boat serves them all?" I responded, not accepting a word of that crazy theory. "How is that possible?"

McNeil shrugged again. "Who knows? Hell, I don't even understand why the little light goes on in here when I flip the switch. Do most people? I just sell tickets and lower the ramp. I'll tell you the company's version, that's all. They say that there's a crack—maybe one of many, maybe the only one. The ship's route just happens to parallel that crack, and this allows you to go between the worlds. Not one ship, of course—twenty, thirty ships or more, one for each world. But, as long as they keep the same schedule, they overlap—and can cross into one or more of the others. If you're on the ship in all those worlds, then you cross, too. Anyone coexisting with the ship in multiple worlds can see and hear not only the one he's in but the ones nearest him, too. People perception's a little harder the farther removed the world you're in is from theirs."

"And you believe this?" I asked him, still disbelieving.

"Who knows? Got to believe *something* or you go nuts," he replied pragmatically. "Look, did you get to St. Michaels this trip?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Looked like this place, pretty much."

He pointed to the navigation atlas. "Try and find it. You won't. Take a drive up through New Brunswick and around to the other side. It doesn't exist. In this world, the *Orcas* goes from here to St. Clement's Island and back again. I understand from some of the crew that sometimes Southport doesn't exist, sometimes the Island doesn't, and so forth. And there are so many countries involved I don't count."

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I shook my head, refusing to accept all this. And yet, it made a crazy kind of sense. These people didn't see each other because they were in different worlds. The girl committed suicide five times because she did it five times in five different worlds—or was it five different girls? It also explained the outlandish dress, the strange mixture of vehicles, people, accents.

"But how come the crew sees people from many worlds and the passengers don't?" I asked him.

McNeil sighed. "That's the other problem. We have to find people who would be up here, working on the *Orcas,* in every world we service. More people's lives parallel than you'd think. The passengers—well, they generally don't exist on a particular run except once. The very few who do still don't take the trip in every world of service. I guess once or twice it's happened that we've had a passenger cross over, but if so we never heard of it."

"And how come I'm here in so many worlds?" I asked him.

McNeil smiled. "You were recruited, of course. The Corporation has a tremendous, intensive recruiting effort involving ferry lines and crewmembers. When they spot one, like you, in just the right circumstance in all worlds, they recruit you—all of you. An even worse job than you'd think, since every season one or two new Bluewater Corporations put identical ferries on this run, or shift routes slightly and overlap. Then we have to make sure the present crew can serve them, too, by recruiting your twin on those worlds."

Suddenly I reached over, grabbed his beard, and yanked.

"*Ouch!* Dammit!" he cried, and pulled my hand away.

"I—I'm sorry, I—" I stammered.

He shook his head, then smiled. "That's all right, son. You're about the seventh person to do that to me in the last five years. I guess there's a lot of varieties of *me,* too."

I thought about all that traffic. "Do others know of this?" I asked him. "I mean, is there some sort of hidden commerce between the worlds on this ferry?"

He grinned. "I'm not supposed to answer that," he said carefully. "But, what the hell. Yes, I think—no, I *know* there is. After all, the shift of people and ships is constant. You move one notch each trip if all of you take the voyage. Sometimes up, sometimes down. If that's true, and if they can recruit a crew that fits the requirements, why not truck drivers? A hell of a lot of truck traffic through here year 'round, you know. No reduced winter service. And some of the rigs are really kinda strange-looking." He sighed.

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"I only know this—in a couple of hours I'll start selling fares again, and I'll sell a half-dozen or so to St. Michael—and *there is no St. Michael.* It isn't even listed on my schedules or maps. I doubt if the Corporation's actually the trader, more the middleman in the deal. But they sure as hell don't make their millions off fares alone."

It was odd the way I was accepting it. Somehow, it seemed to make sense, crazy as it was.

"What's to keep me from using this knowledge somehow?" I asked him. "Maybe bring a team of experts up?"

"Feel free," McNeil answered. "Unless they overlap they'll get a nice, normal ferry ride. And if you can make a profit, go ahead, as long as it doesn't interfere with Bluewater's cash flow. The *Orcas* cost the company over twenty four million *reals* and they want it back."

"Twenty four million *what?"* I shot back.

"Reals," he replied, taking a bill from his wallet. I looked at it.

I looked at it. It was printed in red, and had a picture of someone very ugly labeled "Prince Juan XVI" and an official seal from the "Bank of New Lisboa". I handed it back.

"What country are we in?" I asked uneasily.

"Portugal," he replied casually. "Portuguese America, actually, although only nominally. So many of us Yankees have come in you don't even have to speak Portuguese any more. They even print the local bills in Anglish now."

Yes, that's what he said. Anglish.

"It's the best ferryboat job in the world, though," McNeil continued. "For someone without ties, that is. You'll meet more different kinds of people from more cultures than you'll ever imagine. Three runs on, three off—in as many as twenty-four different variations of these towns, all unique. And a month off in winter to see a little of a different world each time. Never mind whether you buy the explanation—you've seen the results, you know what I say is true. Want the job?"

"I'll give it a try," I told him, fascinated. I wasn't sure if I *did* buy the explanation, but I certainly had something strange and fascinating here.

"O.K., here's twenty *reals* advance," McNeil said, handing me a purple twenty from the cashbox. "Get some dinner if you didn't eat on the ship, get a good night at the motel, then be ready to go on at four tomorrow afternoon."

I got up to leave.

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"Oh, and Mr. Dalton," he added, and I turned to face him.

"Yes?"

"If, while on shore, you fall for a pretty lass, decide to settle down, then do it—*but don't go back on that ship again!* Quit. If you don't she's going to be greeted by a stranger, and you might never find her again."

"I'll remember," I told him.

§ § §

The job was everything McNeil promised and more. The scenery was spectacular, the people an ever-changing, fascinating group. Even the crew changed slightly—a little shorter sometimes, a little fatter or thinner, beards and moustaches came and went with astonishing rapidity, and accents varied enormously. It didn't matter; you soon adjusted to it as a matter of course, and all shipboard experiences were in common, anyway.

It was like a tight family after a while, really. And there were women in the crew, too, ranging from their twenties to the early fifties, not only in food and bar service but as deckhands and the like as well. Occasionally it was a little unsettling, since, in two or three cases out of the crew of 66, they were men in one world, women in another. You got used to even that. It was probably more unsettling for them; they were distinct people, and *they* didn't change sex. The personalities and personal histories tended to parallel, regardless, though, with only a few minor differences.

And the passengers! Some were really amazing. Even seasons were different to some of them, which explained the clothing variations. Certainly what constituted fasion and moral behavior was wildly different, as different as what they ate and the places they came from.

And yet, oddly, people were people. They laughed, and cried, and ate and drank and told jokes—some rather strange, I'll admit—and snapped pictures and all the other things people did. They came from places where the Vikings settled Nova Scotia (called Vinland, naturally), where Nova Scotia was French, or Spanish, or Portuguese, or very, very English. Even one in which Nova Scotia had been settled by Lord Baltimore and called Avalon.

Maine was as wild or wilder. There were two Indian nations running it, the U.S., Canada, Britain, France, and lots of variations some of which I never got straight. There was also a temporal difference sometimes—some people were rather futuristic, with gadgets I couldn't even understand. One truck I loaded was

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powered by some sort of solar power and carried a cargo of food service robots. Some others were behind—still mainly horses, or old-time cars and trucks. I am not certain even now if they were running at different speeds from us or whether some inventions had been made in some places and not in others.

And, McNeil was right. Every new summer season added at least one more. The boat was occasionally so crowded to our crew eyes that we had trouble making our way from one end to the other. Watching staterooms unload was also wild—it looked occasionally like the circus clown act, where 50 clowns get out of a Volkswagen.

And there *was* some sort of trade between the worlds. It was quickly clear that Bluewater Corporation was behind most of it, and that this was what made the line so profitable.

And, just once, there was a horrible, searing pain that hit the entire crew, and a modern world we didn't make any more after that, and a particular variation of the crew we never saw again. And the last newspapers from that world had told of a coming war.

There was also a small crew turnover, of course. Some went on vacation and never returned, some returned but would not reboard the ship. The company was understanding, and it usually meant a little extra work for a few weeks at most until someone new came on.

§ § §

The stars were fading a little now, and I shined the spot over to the red marker for the Captain. He acknowledged seeing it, and made his turn in, the lights of Southport coming into view and masking the stars a bit.

I went through the motions mechanically, raising the bow when the captain hit the mark, letting go the bow lines, checking the clearances, and the like. I was thinking about the girl.

We knew that people's lives in the main did parallel from world to world. Seven times now she'd come aboard, seven times she'd looked at the white wake, and seven times she'd jumped to her death.

Maybe it was the temporal dislocation, maybe she just reached the same point at different stages, but she was always there and she always jumped.

I'd been working the *Orcas* three years, had some strange experiences, and generally pleasurable ones. For the first time I had a job I liked, a family of sorts in the crew, and an ever-changing

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assortment of people and places for a three-point ferry run. In that time we'd lost one world, and gained by our figures three others. That was 26 variants.

Did that girl exist in all 26? I wondered. Would we be subjected to that sadness 19 more times? Or more, as we picked up new worlds?

Oh, I'd tried to find her before she jumped in the past, yes. But she hadn't been consistent, except for the place she chose. We did three runs a day, two crews, so it was six a day more or less. She did it at different seasons, in different years, dressed differently.

You couldn't cover them all.

Not even all the realities of the crew of all worlds, although I knew that we were essentially the same people on all of them and that I—the other mes—were also looking.

I don't even know why I was so fixated, except that I'd been to that point once myself, and I'd discovered that you *could* go on, living with the emotional scars, and find a life.

I didn't even know what I'd say and do if I *did* see her early. I only knew that, if I did, she damned well wasn't going to go over the stern that trip.

In the meantime, my search for her when I could paid other dividends. I prevented a couple of children from going over through childish play, as well as a drunk, and spotted several health problems as I surveyed the people. One turned out to be a woman in advanced labor, and the first mate and I delivered our first child—our first, but the *Orcas'* nineteenth. We helped a lot of people, really, with a lot of different things.

They were all just spectres, of course; they got on the boat often without us seeing them, and they disembarked for all time the same way. There were some regulars, but they were few. And, for them, we were a ghost crew, there to help and to serve.

But, then, isn't that the way you think of anybody in a service occupation? Firemen are firemen, not individuals; so are waiters, cops, street sweepers, and all the rest.

We sailed from Point A to Point C stopping at B, and it was our whole life.

And then, one day in July of last year, I spotted her.

She was just coming on board at St. Clement's—that's why I hadn't noticed her before. We backed into St. Clement's, and I was on the bow lines. But we were short, having just lost a deckhand to a nice-looking fellow in the English Colony of Annapolis Royal, and it was my turn to do some double duty. So, there I was, rout-

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ing traffic on the ship when I saw this little rounded station wagon go by and saw *her* in it.

I still almost missed her; I hadn't expected her to be with another person, another woman, and we were loading the Vinland existence, so in July they were more accurately in a state of undress than anything else, but I spotted her all the same. Jackie Carliner, one of the barmaids and a pretty good artist, had sketched her from the one time she'd seen the girl and we'd made copies for everybody.

Even so, I had my loading duties to finish first—there was no one else. But, as soon as we were underway and I'd raised the stern ramp, I made my way topside and to the lower stern deck. I took my walkie-talkie off the belt clip and called the captain.

"Sir, this is Dalton," I called. "I've seen our suicide girl."

"So what else is new?" grumbled the captain. "You know policy on that by now."

"But, sir!" I protested. "I mean still alive. Still on board. It's barely sundown, and we're a good half hour from the point yet."

He saw what I meant. "Very well," he said crisply. "But you know we're short-handed. I'll put Caldwell on the bow station this time, but you better get some results or I'll give you so much detail you won't have time to meddle in other people's affairs!"

I sighed. Running a ship like this one hardened most people. I wondered if the captain, with nineteen years on the run, even understood why I cared enough to try and stop this girl I didn't know from going in.

Did *I* know, for that matter?

As I looked around at the people going by I thought about it. I'd thought about it a great deal before.

Why *did* I care about these faceless people? People from so many different worlds and cultures that they might as well have been from another planet. People who cared not at all for me, who saw me as an object, a cipher, a service, like those robots I mentioned. They didn't care about me. If *I* were perched on that rail and a crowd was around most of them would probably yell "Jump!"

Most of the crew, too, cared only about each other, to a degree, and about the *Orcas,* our rock of sanity. I thought of that world, gone in some atomic fire. What was the measure of an anonymous human being's worth?

I thought of Joanna and Harmony. With pity, yes, but I realized that Joanna, at least, had been a vampire. She'd needed me,

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needed a rock to steady herself, to unburden herself to, to brag to. Someone steady and understanding, someone whose manner and character suggested that solidity. She'd never really even considered that I might have my own problems, that her promiscuity and lifestyle might be hurting me. Not that she was trying to hurt me—she just never *considered* me.

Like those people going by now. If they stub their toe, or have a question, or slip, or the boat sinks, they need me. Until then, I'm just a faceless automaton to them.

Ready to serve them, to care about them, if *they* needed somebody.

And that was why I was out here in the surprising chill, out on the stern with my neck stuck out a mile, trying to prevent a suicide I *knew* would happen, *knew* because I'd seen it three times before.

I was needed.

That was the measure of a human being's true worth, I felt sure. Not how many people ministered to your needs, but how many people you can help.

That girl—she had been brutalized, somehow, by society. Now I was to provide some counterbalance.

It was the surety of this that kept me from blowing myself up with the old Delaware ferry, or jumping off that stern rail myself.

I glanced uneasily around and looked ahead. There was Shipshead light, tall and proud this time in the darkness, the way I liked it. I thought I could almost make out the marker buoys already. I started to get nervous.

I was certain she'd jump. It'd happened every time before that we'd known. Maybe, just maybe, I thought, in this existence she won't.

I had no more than gotten the thought through my head when she came around the corner of the deck housing and stood in the starboard corner, looking down.

She certainly looked different this time. Her long hair was blond, not dark, and braided in large pigtails that drooped almost to her waist. She wore only the string bikini and transparent cape the Vinlanders liked in summer, and she had several gold rings on each arm, welded loosely there, I knew, and a marriage ring around her neck.

That was interesting, I thought.

Her friend, as thin and underdeveloped as she was stout, was with her. The friend had darker hair and had it twisted high atop

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her head, and had no marriage ring.

I eased over slowly, but not sneakily. Like I said, nobody notices the crewman on a vessel; he's a part of it.

"Luok, are yu sooure yu don' vant to halve a drink or zumpin'?" the friend asked in that curious accent the Vinlanders had developed through cultural pollution with the dominant English and French.

"Naye, I yust vant to smell da zee-spray," the girl replied. "Go on. I vill be alonk before ze zhip iz docking."

The friend was hesitant; I could see it in her manner. But I could also see she would go, partly because she was chilly, partly because she felt she had to show trust to the girl.

She walked off. I looked busy checking the stairway supports to the second deck, and she paid me no mind whatsoever.

There were a few others on deck, but most had gone forward to see us come in, and the couple dressed completely in black sitting there on the bench were invisible to the girl as she was to them. She peered down at the black water and started to edge more to the starboard side engine wake, then a little past, almost to the center. Her upper torso didn't move, but I saw a bare, dirty foot go up on the lower rail.

I walked over, casually. She heard, and turned slightly to see if it was anyone she need be bothered with.

I went up to her and stood beside her.

"Don't do it," I said softly, not looking directly at her. "It's too damned selfish a way to go."

She gave a small gasp and turned to look at me in wonder.

"How—how didt yu—?" she managed.

"I'm an old hand at suicides," I told her, and that was no lie. Joanna, then almost me, then this girl three other times.

"I vouldn't really haff—" she began, but I cut her off.

"Yes you would. You know it and I know it. The only thing you know and I don't is *why.*"

We were inside Shipshead light now. If I could keep her talking just a few more minutes we'd clear the channel markers, and slow for the turn and docking. The turn and the slowdown would make it impossible for her to be caught in propwash, and, I felt, the cycle would be broken, at least for her.

"Vy du yu care?" she asked, turning again to look at the dark sea, only slightly illuminated by the rapidly receding light.

"Well, partly because it's my ship, and I don't like things like that to happen on my ship," I told her. "Partly because I've been

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there myself, and I know how brutal a suicide is."

She looked at me strangely. "Dat's a fonny t'ing tu zay," she responded. "Jost vun qvick jomp and *pszzt!* All ofer."

"You're wrong," I said. "Besides, why would anyone so young want to end it?"

She had a dreamy quality to her face and voice. She was starting to blur, and I was worried that I might somehow translate into a different world-level as we neared shore.

"My 'usbahnd," she responded. "Goldier vas hiss name." She fingered the marriage ring around her neck. "Zo yong, so 'andzum." She turned her head quickly and looked up at me. "Do yu know vat it iz to be fat und ugly und 'alf bloind and haff ze best uv all men zuddenly pay attenzion to yu, vant to *marry* yu?"

I admitted I didn't, but didn't mention my own experiences.

"What happened? He leave you?" I asked.

There were tears in her eyes. "Ya, in a vay, ya. Goldier he jomped out a tventy-story building, he did. Und itz my own fault, yu know. I shud haff been dere. Or, maybe I didn't giff him vat he needed. I dunno."

"Then you of all people know how brutal suicide really is," I retorted. "Look at what it did to you. You have friends, like your friend here. They care. It will hurt them as your husband's hurt you. This girl with you—she'll carry guilt for leaving you alone the whole rest of her life." She was shaking now, not really from the chill, and I put my arm around her. Where the hell were those marker lights?

"Do you see how cruel it is? What suicide does to others? It leaves a legacy of guilty, much of it false guilt. And you might be needed by someone else, sometime, to help them. Somebody else might die because you weren't there."

She looked up at me, then seemed to dissolve, collapse into a crescendo of tears, and sat down on the deck. I looked up and saw the red and green markers astern, felt the engines slow, felt the *Orcas* turn.

"Ghetta!" The voice was a piercing scream in the night. I looked up and saw her friend running to us from coming down the stairway. Anxiety and concern was in her stricken face, and there were tears in her eyes. She bent down to the still sobbing girl. "I shud nefer haff left yu!" she sobbed, and hugged the girl.

I sighed. The *Orcas* was making its dock approach now, the ringing of the bells said that Caldwell had managed to raise the bow without crashing us into the dock.

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"My Gott!" the friend swore, then looked up at me. "Yu stopped her? How can I effer—?"

But they both already had that ethreal, unnatural double image about them, both fading into a different existence than mine.

"Just remember there's a million Ghettas out there," I told them both. "And you can make them or break them."

I turned and walked away as I heard the satisfying thump and felt the slight jerk of the ferry fitting into the ramp. I stopped and glanced back at the stern, but I could see no one. Nobody was there.

Who were the ghosts? I mused. Those women, or the crew of the *Orcas?* How many times did hundreds of people from different worlds coexist on this ship without knowing it?"

How many times did people in the *same* world coexist without knowing each other, or caring about each other, for that matter?

"Mr. Dalton!" snapped a voice in my walkie-talkie.

"Sir?" I responded.

"Well?" the captain promised.

"No screams this time, Captain," I told him, satisfaction in my voice. "One young woman will live."

There was a long pause, and, for a moment, I thought he might actually be human. Then he snapped, "There's eighty-six assorted vehicles still waiting to be off-loaded, and might I remind you we're short-handed and on a strict schedule?"

I sighed and broke into a trot. Business was business, and I had a whole world to throw out of the car deck so I could run another one in.

AND ONE FOR MY FRIEND HERE, PLEASE

A man who leaped time at a bound
Thought paradox far from profound;
  Now, wiser by far,
  He buys drinks at the bar
For his doubles, who follow his 'round.

—John M. Ford

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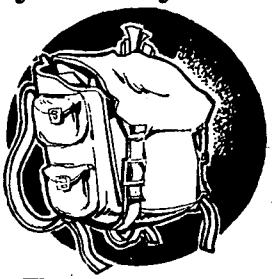
ON THE WAY
by Conway Conley



The author wanted to do science fiction about the time he started college. In time (which included four college majors, a year's work experience, a B.S. degree, and a Navy hitch) he decided to write it instead. It took a year, he tells us, to make his first sale, this story.

The bed was low, and he struggled for some time to get to his feet. Several times he almost invented different furniture; chairs, perhaps, or a bed high enough that a person could get his legs under himself when getting out of it. Finally, by finding handholds on the rough-textured wall, he was able to stand.

He looked down at his bed. There beside it was the bell, placed within easy reach the first day he hadn't gotten out of bed. And the cup and jug, which had been moved back a little each time they tended him, for fear he would spill it into his bedding. There was no clock; in fact there was only one in the house, and he wasn't so used to measuring time as to think of counting his last hours.

He faced the door and pushed at the wall, gently, then a little harder until he was away from its support and walking. Might have to follow the wall around to the door; no, he could balance well enough to walk across the middle of the floor.

The outer room was empty; he surveyed it while he rested holding to the doorframe. Then he launched himself toward the outer door. Step by step; suddenly a voice sounded behind him, "Grandsire, where are you going? Marsha says we've made things so you'll be comfortable in bed," and a youngster appeared to his right.

Carefully gathering breath to speak without losing his concentration on walking, he said, "A man's got to be comfortable in his spirit as well as his body."

The child watched silently, curious and uncertain about the struggles of one in the terminal stage of life.

"Here, open that door, will you?" he grunted.

"I'm not sure that Marsha or Todd'd want me to," but the youngster hardly hestitated, making it clear that a certain word

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from him still drew more respect than implications dropped by those two. Which ones were they, he wondered as he rested in the outer doorway. He had a granddaughter named Marsha, he was sure, but they might have given a later child the same name. As for Todd, that sounded like a grand- or great-grandchild.

The boy held the door until he shoved off from the doorframe and started walking across the yard. After that he didn't see or hear him; he didn't want to try looking behind.

The sky was blue with sunlit clouds. Too bright, actually, but he couldn't see well in dim light either; evening would come on a little earlier for him than for the others.

Sky above and ground beneath; an improvement over indoors, but he still wanted a clear view of the horizon. There was a knoll west of the house, and that was where he wanted to be.

"Grandsire, whatever is the matter? Why didn't you tell us?" The new interruption broke his concentration on walking over the slightly uneven ground; he was tiring. He stood and watched the woman-child running toward him. This one he remembered, though the name had slipped from him again. Very attractive, and about fifteen. Some men when they reached senior years misjudged the ages of teenage girls. He knew because he had done it; but he had had ample time since then to learn to tell ages all over again, as the great-grandchildren and their children grew so numerous that he lost track of names and parentage.

He was tired; he leaned on the proffered young body and directed her steps, "Out. Out to where the grass meets the sky." He thought that was a pretty good line, at least considering that it was extemporaneous.

But as they passed a bench she said, "Do you want to rest, Grandsire?" And he scanned the way west to the knoll, found it devoid of anything on which to sit, and said, "Yes."

"You like the out-of-doors, Grandsire?"

He liked her sensible approach to a person's wants and needs. "I was on a journey when I came here. Stayed most of my life, but I felt I should at least start on a little way."

Her face took on a serious look. Apparently she felt as if he had always been here. "I've heard you were a pet of the Overholders," she said, and it was obvious that she had put that information in the back of her mind, not forgotten but out of reach of her feelings until now.

"Until I was forty."

"I've never seen an Over."

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"They've probably seen you. But you know what they look like, of course?"

She nodded doubtfully. "I've seen the pictures and all that, but I don't think it's the same as seeing one, certainly not like actually going up and touching them."

He was silent then.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Thinking about Inzlai, the Overholder who was my mistress—that's feminine for master, if you'll recall—and how she used to pick me up and hold me and ask me how my history was coming. She didn't understand most of it; computer scientists and engineers make better pets because any young Overholder can understand what they're doing. But Inzlai liked me anyway."

He paused, wondering how much this human child who had never seen a member of the ruling race wanted to know, or wanted to hear from him since she'd probably already been taught it by her parents or uncles, aunts or grandparents. "The young ones who keep pets develop a knack for communicating with humans, but if you want to really talk with an Overholder you have to find one who has gone on to study it as an adult. I never really tried; wanted to work on my problem myself, through human resources."

They were silent for a minute or two, then, as if she had just worked her way through what he had said, suddenly she asked, "And what was your problem?"

"Two questions, actually. Is this our native planet, the world called Terra? And were we here first, or the Overholders?"

"It seems natural enough," she said, gazing off as if to include the sun and air and living things. "Except sometimes, when you can't get quite right. But I suppose they could have changed our chemistry to match this world if they brought us here from somewhere else."

"Or if we stowed away on their starships. It's less likely; but if this isn't Terra, and if we've weighed the legends aright to say that we never got very far into space by ourselves, I've always liked the idea that we took our own passage.

"I'd like to walk on out to the knoll now."

She helped him to stand. Then he put an arm on her shoulders, and found that he liked that as much as he liked getting out of the house. Wondered if this was one of his twice-great- or even thrice-great- grandchildren. All the later generations must be descendants of his by now; there had never been many people in

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the group. Maybe he was exaggerating his age. Children didn't come often in these times; it had been the occasion for a party when his granddaughter had conceived at the age of only twenty-five. Maybe he wasn't old enough to be a thrice-great-grandfather. He wondered if the incest taboo extended as far as twice-greats. The old book said that the thought in the heart was as much as the act; he doubted that he had it left in him to get beyond thinking. Their community was too small to have formal rules for uncommon situations, but great-greats probably had fewer genes in common than did some of the couplings they had allowed, so he could let himself think as lasciviously as he wanted.

She asked., "How did you get away when you were a pet?"

"I didn't really want to get away from Inzlai, surprising as that may sound. Her holding—her family, roughly, but I guess you know how hard their society is for us to understand, with so many life stages and more sexes than we have—they were on a trip away from their usual habitation, and I was often out exploring libraries and I forgot when they were leaving. We had been there ten years; I was only thirty when we got there, and that much time seemed nearly as long and vague to me then as it does to you now.

"When I got back to the campsite, there was nothing there. Except a backpack with some things I might need, and a note from Inzlai, so I set out walking to get home."

"Maybe they took off for another planet or solar system."

"She wouldn't have sent me a quarter of the way around the planet to find an empty holding. She knew I might make it, because she had told me of another pet that had found her way home even further, and I had told her I'd heard the same story from other pets. And I would have made it, if I hadn't stopped off here."

"Because establishing an independent human colony was more important than going to see an Overholder," she recited.

"Actually, I didn't intend to stay. It was about to rain when I came upon Carl and Thelma and Leslie working desperately to get some hay into the barn before it got wet, and I helped even though I didn't know much about hay at the time."

He stopped talking, aware that he had caused some confusion. The Carl and Thelma and Leslie of whom he spoke had died, others had been born and given the names, long before this child's birth, and it took her a moment to check the facts she knew. When her face signalled that she had the characters in order, he

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continued. "They let me stay until the rain stopped and the grass dried; and then the cow, the only one and the mother of all that you have now, had gotten loose and wandered off. They had to find her, so I joined the hunt. And then helped to build a fence. One thing led to another. Winter came, and I stayed over. Spring, and I wanted to plant enough of the new crops to pay for what I'd eaten over the winter. Summer, and I was so involved with the care of the crops that I wanted to see them harvested. But I was still on my way home. Just spending a little time with my own people on the way."

"And I always thought it was because we were important," she pouted.

"Judge for yourself; you're old enough to do that. Everyone who was here when I stopped by has been dead and gone sixty years, and I've just gotten this far west of the house on my journey. Let me sit down; I can see the way I was going. I think," he hedged, realizing that a gray curtain had come down between him and the world. They sat on the grass.

"There are no Overholders around here," she said, speaking out of her own thoughts.

"They may be watching us right now. Or not. Maybe this colony was their idea to start with, or maybe they don't know we're here. You never know about the Overholders."

"Did Inzlai have the furry arms?"

"Yes. When they're about that age (I think she was about four hundred), they don't care much whether they look handsome or dignified (to other Overholders); so if they keep soft-skinned pets they usually grow soft flesh and hair on one set of arms, the better to take care of us. Inzlai's were not quite as soft as you are, but more satiny. It was her second triad of arms; I was vain at the time and wanted her to change her first triad for me and use her second three arms for the things she needed hard skin for. But she didn't."

"I bet after she lost you she grew soft fur on both triads. Not for always, just for a few years."

"Too inconvenient, but that's a generous thought, child. I don't know what to call you."

"Evelyn."

"Are you my great-great-granddaughter or my great-great-great-granddaughter?"

"Both, My father Carl is your daughter Velda's grandson, and my mother Inzlai is your daughter Sharon's great-granddaughter."

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"Inzlai. I wasn't sure we'd used the name. Who was her mother?"

"Thelma. Thelma II."

"And whose child is Carl?"

She giggled; it took him a moment to realize he had called her father a child. Then she said, "Leslie II's. Listen, how can you be sure Inzlai—the Overholder, not my mother; I don't know how we'll keep the names straight if we have any more Inzlai's, 'cause I can't figure out whether my mother is Inzlai the First or Inzlai the Second. Anyway, maybe your mistress got tired of you, didn't want any soft arms anymore and so forth, and just dumped you. Maybe her holding wanted her to grow up."

"I trust her. As for growing up, she was just starting a stage that lasts about two hundred years; few Overholders that have pets lose interest in them before six hundred.

"Besides, Overholders hardly ever abandon a pet. I've heard stories that if they can no longer keep one or find another to take it, they'll sometimes kill it. One story has it that former pets sometimes turn into real nuisances. Another is that they do it to save us starving or dying of exposure.

"I suppose that could happen if they didn't have some place like our colony to come to."

After a time she said, "I've heard most of these things before, but they come out different when I hear them from you."

She was quiet then. The warmth of the sun slowly mixed with the cool morning air. His thoughts were as the day, warm and poignant and blurred around the edges so that he couldn't be sure how much he thought of his uncompleted journey and how much of his grandchild's grandchild.

The sun rose further, and now part of his sunshine rose too, the part named Evelyn. "Is there anything you need that I can send from the house?" she asked.

"Something to lean against." He lay back on the grass; he had been sitting too long.

Some time later a man carried out a rolled-up mattress and arranged it as a backrest, so that he could face west. As the sun grew hot a youth set up a sunshade. Still later a child brought a flask and asked if he was thirsty, and helped him raise it to his lips. Cider; he liked it, though really he could taste so little these last few days that they might about as well have saved the cider for themselves and sent him water.

He watched the western horizon and imagined himself walking

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across it. Inzlai would probably still be with her holding in the same location; he thought he would recognize her yet, even with six hard glassy arms.

Favored pets lived a long time; even by the time he was forty she must have given him more than she was supposed to of whatever it was, or he wouldn't have lived a century beyond the natural span. Even now, he wondered, if he were there and not here, would she lift the weight of age from him and keep him vigorous for another half century or beyond?

Just as he could tell the sun was going down the afternoon sky, Evelyn returned. "Great-great-great-grandfather," and it was the first time she had used the full title, "By what name were you known when you were a pet of Inzlai?"

"Thomas Huntington Clifford Pence. Five-eight-one-four-two-three-seven."

She wrote. Then she held papers in front of him. "Is this the map Inzlai left for you, and these you drew from memory, and this was given you by a human you met?" He had difficulty focusing, but he recognized the buildings of the holding in his sketches, and the maps. He nodded. She put them in a backpack that he recognized as the one he had hung in the First House one rainy evening a century plus a generation ago, and still he did not understand. She hesitated with her arms already into the straps, set it down, and said, "Give me your blessing, Grandsire the eldest." She swooped down too quickly for his aging eyes to follow and kissed him full on the mouth (which he feared had let some of the cider run down his chin). He put his arms around her, murmuring, "Sweet, sweet child," as she pressed her body against him for a brief moment that reached back through the generations he had tarried here. Then she was on her feet, and in another moment the pack (strong as when Inzlai had left it at the campsite) was on her strong young back, and she turned and started off to the west. At last he understood what she had said. And he wanted to call after her; but he was confused as to what he should say, perhaps ask if she had made sure there were duplicate maps and did her parents know where she was going. But he couldn't find the strength. His eyes were dimming, but for a long time he could see Evelyn walking across the western horizon.

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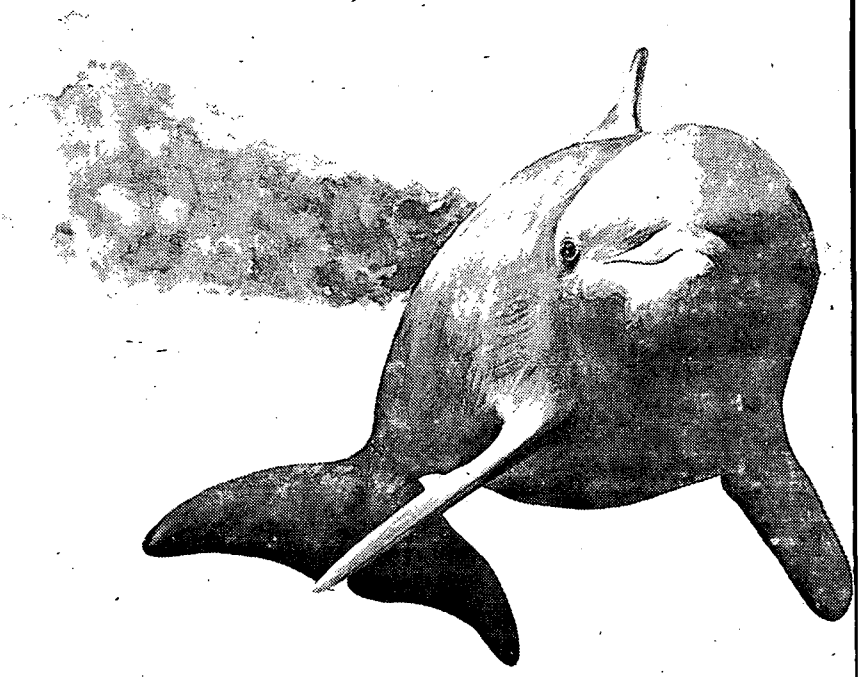
BUT DO THEY RIDE DOLPHINS?

by Frederick S. Lord, Jr.



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Mr. Lord was born in Concord, NH, in 1951, and grew up down the road from a man who worked at a large printing plant. Every few weeks, the author's father would dispatch him and his little red wagon to pick up a boxful of whatever the plant was printing —and there was always a batch of new science fiction. He's also painted fire hydrants, survived the graveyard shift at a yarn mill, worked as a carpenter's helper, and tested tantalum capacitors.

"Why, how absolutely darling!" Mrs. Hunt exclaimed when she entered the Malones' living room. "Come see, Wallace! They've got a little Water Baby!" She put her heavily powdered nose an inch from the plexiglass of the darkened tank and cooed at the equally curious figure within. "What a cute little thing you are," she said.

Professor Hunt joined his wife in front of the large tank and nodded appreciatively. "Fascinating animals, aren't they?" He turned to their hosts. "And quite a conversation piece, I imagine."

Jeff Malone smiled. "Yes, he is. Every time we have people over, we usually spend the first hour talking about little Nemo here."

Mrs. Hunt tapped on the tank with a long orange fingernail. "Hi there, little fellow."

"Please don't do that," Mary Ann Malone told her. "He's supposed to be taking a nap, and I don't want him to get too stirred up."

Mrs. Hunt straightened and sniffed. "Of course. Is it always that dark in there? I wish we could get a better look. That is," she added with less good nature than the words alone might have suggested, "if it's all right with his mother."

Mary Ann stiffened, then relaxed. Another one who will never understand, she told herself. "It's just that Nemo likes to see out," she explained calmly. She walked over to the tank and opened a door in the cabinet below the chamber. Professor Hunt bent down to catch a glimpse of the machinery within.

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"Are those batteries back there?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mary Ann. "In case of emergencies. That's the air pump over there, and that's the heater." Reaching in, she flipped a switch and the interior of the tank was suddenly illuminated.

Little Nemo was now thirty inches long from the tip of his vestigial nose to the tip of his wide flippers. At last check he had weighed slightly over twenty-four pounds. Except for his face, hands, and feet, he was covered with a thick golden fur, shot through with streaks of brown, to which all his fur would eventually darken.

His hands, now pressed against the glass, were of human construction, except that his thumbs and little fingers were longer and more developed than those of an ordinary human infant would have been. Webby membranes filled the spaces between his fingers as far as the first knuckles. From the outsides of his thumbs and little fingers stretched other membranes, connected to the insides and the outsides of his elbows. Another set of membranes connected the back of his elbows to the lower ribs on each side, giving his upper body a batlike appearance.

"Mmn . . ." Mary Ann said with disapproval. "Time to clean those gills again."

"Absolutely charming!" Mrs. Hunt announced. "I had no idea they could be so cute."

Mary Ann reached down and snapped off the light. "Now you settle down," she said to Nemo, shaking her finger at him. He began darting from corner to corner of his crib. "I mean it," said Mary Ann. Stepping up on a stool next to the tank, she reached into the water and the wriggling little body came up to be scratched.

Jeff frowned. "Well, now that all the introductions have been made, let's have a drink, shall we? Come along, dear."

"I'll be right with you," said Mary Ann, still scratching Nemo. "Strangers make him nervous, and I want to make sure he understands everything's all right."

"We'll be in the other room." Jeff told her. "Don't be long."

"I won't." she answered, but she was still not looking at her husband when she said it.

§ § §

After dinner, Mrs. Hunt insisted on helping Mary Ann with the dishes. "You wash and I'll wipe." she said. "I haven't forgotten how."

"I'm sure Mary's used to having her hands in water." Professor

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Hunt commented slyly.

Mrs. Hunt held up one of the Malones' mismatched saucers. "Look, Wallace! Aren't those faculty wives' basement sales wonderful? This was part of old Professor Campbell's, set, wasn't it?"

Professor Hunt looked up from his coffee and smiled. "Why, yes; I think it is. I didn't know they were still making the rounds."

Mrs. Hunt smirked. "Not only are they hideous, they're practically unbreakable."

Professor Hunt suddenly felt the need to compensate for his wife's embarrassing lack of tact. "You know, Celia, Jeff and Mary Ann will be eating off silver pretty soon, if they want to. Judging by the size of their pet out there, it shouldn't be too long before it's time to cash him in."

"That's right, too," said Jeff, as if that had just occurred to him. "Someone from Seattle is coming down the fourteenth, I think it is. Did they say the fourteenth or the fifteenth, dear?"

Mary Ann kept her eyes on the dishes in the sink. "The fourteenth," she said softly.

"Well, that's not very long to wait at all," Professor Hunt said. "I'm glad for you, Jeff—I really am. I've watched some very promising law students leave here simply because they weren't ingenious enough to find the money to continue. And you won't spend your first ten years after school paying off those insidious student loans they're always talking young people into."

"No, we'll be able to start out fresh, all right," said Jeff proudly. "Nothing to weigh us down."

There was a slap and a splash from the living room.

"There he goes again," Jeff sighed. "That's another thing I'm looking forward to: being able to get a full night's sleep again. You'd be surprised at how much trouble these little monsters are."

"I'll be right back," said Mary Ann. She paused in the doorway on her way out of the room. "And I'll thank you kindly, Jeffery, if you'll refrain from calling my child a monster."

§ § §

Trying to determine how far genetic engineering could go before the fetus became so incompatible with its mother that it was no longer viable, scientists at the Seattle Eugenics Institute wrought increasingly radical but theoretically harmonious changes in one experiment after another. When repeated attempts to create a more complicated and more specialized baby from the given genetic material of its parents failed, the final step was taken. A

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human volunteer was found, and before the moral, ethical, legal, or social questions involved could be adequately expressed, a *Homo Aquaticus* named Frank was a thriving, ecologically adapted reality.

The usefulness of *Homo A.* was never in doubt. Not only was he used to cultivate and harvest the algae, seaweed, and dozens of other types of edible sea life; there were many others jobs that he could do better than they had ever been done before. With historical consistency, the CIA devised many projects in which *H.A.* played an important part. Utility companies, looking for a cheaper way to inspect and maintain undersea cables, pipelines, and mines, found *H.A.* a savior with fins. Salvage outfits, marine biologists, oceanographers, and dozens of other industries and agencies quickly saw his potential.

The demand for Homo A. soon outstripped the supply. While there was no shortage of volunteers to be host mothers, only a limited number of women had both the genetic and the psychological potential to succeed at bearing and raising an infant *Homo A.*

For Jeff and Mary Ann Malone, the one hundred thousand dollars paid for a healthy Sea Farmer was a quick solution to an otherwise hopeless financial crunch. Casting about desperately for some way to keep her husband in school and their dreams intact, she had applied to the Institute and been accepted. The implantation had been painless, the pregnancy uneventful. The delivery had been a long, foggy, but not totally unpleasant dream. And now . . .

§ § §

"Do you mind?" Jeff asked angrily. "I've had a hell of a long day and I've got a longer one coming up tomorrow." He bleared at the two occupants of the tank, and then at the clock humming benignly on the coffee table. "It's almost three, for God's sake."

Mary Ann pushed her short damp hair back from her face and blinked at him, a foolish smile slowly fading from her lips. "Oh, is it? I'm sorry, dear. I didn't realize we were making that much noise. Nemo was restless, that's all."

Suddenly Nemo's flippers emerged in front of Mary Ann's face and slapped the water hard, spraying her in a sneak attack. "You!" she cried, and lunged for the elusive prankster without success. "How would you like to be tickled?"

Jeff stepped back and examined the drops of water on the rug by his slippers. "Do you mind?" he repeated.

But Mary Ann was laughing. Nemo had attacked her toes with

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his hard gums. "Easy!" she cautioned. "I don't want to be pobbled!"

"Come out of there right now!" Jeff commanded. "I'm not going to put up with this much longer."

"Why don't you join us?" Mary Ann offered. "Or have you had your weekly shower?"

"Be serious, will you?"

"All right," she sighed. "Hand me my robe, will you?" She stepped up on the stool she had brought with her into Nemo's crib and swung first one, then the other leg out of the water and onto the stool outside the tank. Jeff tossed her the robe and continued to scowl.

"You could have a little consideration for me, too, you know." he told her. "After all, I am your husband."

"Is that who you are!" Mary Ann exclaimed sarcastically. "I was wondering who that person I was catching a brief glimpse of twice a day was. I'm glad you introduced yourself; I might never have known."

"Things will get better," he promised routinely.

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime—hibernate?" She stepped down from the stool and turned back to regard the disappointed little face watching her every move. "Fun's over, sweetheart," she told him. "Real Monster says we have to be quiet and go to sleep." She wrapped the robe tightly around herself, crossed the living room, and sat down on the couch.

Jeff was still angry. "I thought I asked you not to sit on the couch when you're all wet," he snapped.

"Oh, go back to bed," she answered. "And dry up, yourself."

"This isn't natural, you know."

"What isn't? That a baby should get restless in the middle of the night?"

He sat down at the other end of the couch and lit a cigarette from the pack lying on the end table. "You know exactly what I'm talking about," he said with his first exhalation of smoke. "It's not natural to feel the way you do about that. . ." He gestured at the tank. "High-class bastard."

"He's as human as you are, Jeff. At times, more so."

"That's what the shrinks pounded into your head. If I'd had any idea how much of your time he was going to take, I would never have gone along with this."

"Well, you're the one who brought the brochures." She watched the air bubbles rising in Nemo's crib and unconsciously gauged

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the oxygenator's speed. "I had no idea you could be so jealous, Jeff."

"You have to give him up, you know."

"I don't want to. I want to buy a house on the beach and raise him myself. But I don't suppose you understand that. You don't care about anyone but yourself these days."

Jeff took a long drag on his cigarette before answering. "Look," he said finally. "There's nothing I can do about it. We've got a contract that says what's going to happen to Nemo, and that's that."

"But I'm his mother, Jeff," said Mary Ann, her voice now a hoarse whisper. The salt water running slowly down her cheeks had not come from the tank. "What's going to happen to him? Who's going to take care of him? He needs *me,* Jeff!"

"But he'll enjoy being with his own kind."

"But we're his own kind, too."

"That's just what the psychologists told you to think."

"No. It's true. Don't you care what becomes of him?"

"I read all the information," Jeff said. "He's going to be trained at the Institute for a couple of years, and then he's going to be put to work wherever they think he'll do best."

"But will he be happy?"

"All the Water Babies are very well treated. Stop worrying about that."

"That's not what I mean!" she cried.

Jeff put out his cigarette and stood. "You're too excited to make any sense right now. I'm going to bed. I suggest you take a shower and do likewise. Good night."

She made no reply. Jeff gave out a sigh of combined weariness and frustration and went back into the bedroom. Less than a minute later, he was asleep.

Mary Ann gazed at the little figure floating in the tank, also asleep. She tried to imagine his leaving her, but the thought was too painful. Would he think she had stopped loving him? He would be confused and terrified, she was sure. And she was equally certain that no one else would ever care for him as she had.

She had seen the movies depicting the undersea lives of the Sea Farmers. She had read all she could about them. They planted and they tended and they harvested. They fished and they welded and they explored. They ate well and worked hard. They slept soundly and they seemed content.

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"But do they ride dolphins?" she asked, and there was no one there to answer her.

§ § §

Mary Ann unlocked the apartment door while still cradling the two heavy shopping bags of groceries in her arms. Saturday afternoon presented an exhausting change of her routine, but a welcome one. Not that there was much romance in paying bills, buying hamburger, and running a dozen errands all over town, but she did have time to herself—time to windowshop and daydream. Those few hours out of the apartment, tiring as they were, somehow reenergized her for the week.

She kicked the door closed behind her and snapped on the light. Then she glanced over to the long blank wall opposite the picture window and dropped the groceries at her feet.

Gone. The tank, the cabinet, Nemo. Nothing but a depressed and lighter rectangle of rug. They had taken him. They had come on a weekend and they had taken him away.

The small red rubber ball that had been nestled in the top of one of the grocery bags rolled into the empty space. The other bag was slowly staining with broken eggs. Gasping, she left the groceries where they lay and went into the kitchen. She knew Jeff would hardly have moved everything into the other room, but she allowed herself a few seconds of hope.

On the kitchen table, strategically displayed, was an expensive set of Havilland bone china with a striking red pattern. It was one of the things she had once told Jeff she dreamed of having one day, when he was a successful lawyer and they had a house of their own.

There was a note on one of the saucers. Before she had picked it up in her trembling hand to read, she had recognized Jeff's scrawl:

Dearest:

I thought it would be easier for you if we did it this way. Everything went very smoothly, and Nemo was just fine. Will bring home a steak and a bottle for supper.

Love, Jeff.

It was a very large set of china. It took the sobbing young woman a long time to smash every piece.

§ § §

Mary Ann pressed her palms and her nose to the picture win-

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dow of the Malones' new house and studied without much interest the flora and fauna of Chicago suburbia. There was not really all that much to see. The ranch style homes, evenly spaced on smoothly paved streets, challenged the eye to find anything out of place or out of the ordinary. The houses were all very nice. The second cars parked in the driveways next to the houses were all very nice. And the people who lived in the houses and drove the cars were all very nice.

In the two years since they had left the West Coast and moved to the Midwest, Mary Ann had met a lot of nice people and had been invited into a lot of nice homes. Jeff was doing well in the firm, and bringing new and influential friends home almost every week "to meet the Mrs. and shoot the breeze." And all those couples Jeff expected her to charm were just like Celia and Wally Hunt. In ten or twenty years, she told herself, she and Jeff would evolve into Celia and Wally Hunt themselves. Nobody asks this fish how things look from her side of the glass, Mary Ann thought. Nobody.

She let her memory replay the argument she and Jeff had had the night before. She wanted to go back to school. She wanted to go back to work. She wanted to do anything that would make her something more than his cook, his housekeeper, and his houri. And Jeff liked things just the way they were.

Then, that next morning, he had suggested a compromise. Over coffee, he had talked about having "a real baby." "To give you something to do," he had said. "To keep you company during the day."

And she had thrown everything at him that wasn't nailed down. She was not going to be bought off this time, she had screamed at him. He was an insensitive moron, unqualified for fatherhood. He had sold their first baby; what was to say he would not do it again?

Somewhere in the midst of all that, Jeff had mumbled some kind of apology and ducked out of the house, coffee dripping from his tie.

By midafternoon, she had the kitchen straightened out, her face put back together, and her mind made up. She knew now what she had to do, and she would do it. Jeff would probably not understand, but she had tried to get her message across in the note now taped to the refrigerator.

As she watched out the window, a battered yellow cab pulled into the driveway. She picked up her suitcase and her pocketbook

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and went outside.

§ § §

Mrs. Danis's hazel eyes twinkled at the young woman waiting for her in her office. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Malone. I swear I spend half my time on the phone."

"I hope I haven't taken you away from something important," said Mary Ann.

"They don't let me do anything important any more," Mrs. Danis told her. She sat down behind her cluttered desk and tucked a stray brown hair back into the loose bun on top of her head. "Coffee?" she asked.

"No, thank you. I really don't want to take up much of your time. I've just come to ask you a few questions, that's all." Mary Ann found it difficult to think of Mrs. Danis as one of the key scientists working at the Institute. The ratty green sweater and the faded jeans, although practical attire considering her role as "principal" of the Sea School, did not help to remind an observer of her prestige. And the string of pearls bobbing on the outside of the old sweater gave the fortyish woman an air of unsettling eccentricity.

"Well, ask away," said Mrs. Danis. "It's part of my job." She reached out a rough-skinned hand and drew back the curtains from her office window. Beyond, a large pool swarmed with half-grown Sea Farmers, supervised by a trio of frowning behaviorists.

"I'm amazed at how fast they grow," Mary Ann commented.

"Yes. It seems like no time at all from when we get them to when we send them off. I guess that's true in a lot of situations. Did Dr. Hargen give you the tour?"

"Yes. He was very considerate. I had no idea this place was so large. There are so many."

Neither woman said anything for a few moments.

"Well, now," Mrs. Danis began cheerfully. "I suppose you're interested in what became of your little fellow."

Mary Ann tried to hide her surprise. "Why, yes; I am. Do you remember him? He had brown markings on his back and a . . ."

"Mrs. Malone." Mrs. Danis interrupted patiently. "We deliberately do not keep records of where our pupils come from. You must know why. Besides, we handle thousands now. Their markings change as they grow older. We couldn't locate him for you if we tried. I'm sorry; I thought you knew."

"Oh," was all Mary Ann could say.

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"You say he came to us about two years ago—is that correct?"

"Oh, did I? I don't remember. I mean, yes; two years ago this month."

Mrs. Danis shuffled some papers and nodded agreement with whatever she had read. "Was he a very active fellow? He might have been graduated with last month's class."

Mary Ann managed a sad smile at the memory. "Yes. And he was very good with his hands."

"Then he probably went to the Vancouver beds. Most of our best ones have gone there recently. It won't be long before we have the entire Sound under cultivation."

"Are you sure that's where he is?"

"No, I can't be positive. But that's the most likely place he'd be. Not that you'd be able to recognize him, you understand. Or that you could find him, for that matter."

Mary Ann's chin trembled in an attempted show of determination. "I think I could recognize my own son. I just . . . I just wanted to see him one more time. You see, I never got the chance to say goodbye to him. I never got the chance to explain."

"I'm sure he understands," Mrs. Danis said gently. "He's got a new life now. And lots of new friends. Listen: it's four o'clock now. Why don't you come home with me for a drink and one of my husband's fantastic dinners? Then we can talk this over the way we should."

"Thank you anyway," Mary Ann said, rising. "I want to thank you for your time." She whirled out the door before Mrs. Danis could say another word.

§ § §

The five o'clock ferry from Seattle was crowded with cars and bored commuters. What few tourists were aboard could be detected by their presence at the rails, leaning over for a better view of the Sea Farms below.

Mary Ann peered down through the blue-green water, her mind caught up in its own turbulence. The bright red rubber ball bulging out her pocket still wore its price sticker.

Perhaps if one of the Sea Farmers had not looked up with a curiousity of his own, she would not have tried to act on the impulse that had momentarily overtaken her imagination.

She had one shoeless foot up on the rail when a hand reached out and took her by the arm and a gentle voice said, "No."

§ § §

"Thank you for stopping me from doing something foolish,"

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Mary Ann said simply. "I'm glad you followed me."

Mrs. Danis's hazel eyes twinkled. "I knew what you might do the first minute we talked, Mary. Having just talked with Jeff on the phone, I had already started to worry about you. I've seen the look you had in your eyes before."

"You have?"

"Mary, did you think you were the first woman who's felt the way you do? Or that you'll be the last? Whatever we give life to gives life back to us. We don't give up that life without losing some of our own. It would have been unnatural if you had not loved your son. You give psychologists and hypnotherapists far too much credit. Oh, yes; I've seen that look before. The first time I saw it was in the mirror."

Mary Ann gaped. "You?"

Mrs. Danis nodded proudly. "I have five sons somewhere beneath the waves. I loved every one of them, and I cried when every one of them had to leave.

"But I'm grateful for what I've had. I think of them as strong, successful, handsome young men, doing what every mother hopes her children will do: make the future possible. I like to think of them as oceanographers' assistants, or as foremen at the offshore oil rigs, or as . . ." She held out her necklace, then took it off and put it around Mary Ann's neck. "Pearl harvesters."

"But do they ride dolphins?" Mary Ann murmured wistfully.

"Mmn? What's that? Oh, yes; they do. The younger ones, anyway. They're not supposed to, but the dolphins love it. And you know how little boys are."

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THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

A lot of cons to choose from this time—no excuse not to check out an SF fan gathering near you. For a later list (I'm writing this in January), and a sample of SF folksongs, send an addressed, stamped envelope to me at 10015 Greenbelt Rd. #101, Seabrook, MD 20801. If you can't reach cons at these numbers, call me at (301) 794-7718. Make calls 10 AM to 10 PM only.

MidWestCon, June 23-25, 1978, Cincinnati, OH. One of the longest-running, most relaxed cons around. (513) 791-4670

WesterCon, July 1-4, Los Angeles, CA. The premiere Western event, and a great warmup for IguanaCon. (213) 838-0297

Conebulus, July 7-9, Syracuse, NY. Ben Bova. (315) 471-7003

UniCon, July 7-9, Washington, DC. Gets better each time. Now in new, larger facilities off campus. (301) 794-7374

Archon, July 14-16, St. Louis, MO. 2nd time. (314) 647-8366

RiverCon, July 28-30, Louisville, KY. A preview of next year's NorthAmeriCon, by the same people. (502) 636-5340

ParaCon, July 28-30, State College, PA. (814) 238-3642

August Party, August 4-6, Washington, DC. My favorite Star Trek con, with a strong fannish flavor. (301) 277-1354

IguanaCon, August 30-Sept. 4, Phoenix, AZ. The first World SF Con in the Southwest. Guest of Honor: Harlan Ellison. Join while it's still $15. Box 1072, Phoenix, AZ 85001

Fantasy Faire, Sept. 22-24, Los Angeles, CA. (213) 337-7947

PghLANGE, Sept. 29-Oct. 1, Pittsburgh, PA. Low-keyed, for fans just recovering from the WorldCon. (412) 561-3037

NonCon, Oct. 7-9, 1978, Edmonton, Alberta. (403) 986-3870

WesterCon, July 4 Weekend, 1979, San Francisco, CA. Write to: 195 Alhambra #9, San Francisco, CA 94123

SeaCon, Aug. 23-27, Brighton, England. The World Convention for 1979. Charter flights are planned. Write the US agent at: Pussywillows, Off Wheeler Lane, Natick, MA 01760

NorthAmeriCon, August 30-Sept. 3, 1975, Louisville, KY. The interim con for those who can't get to SeaCon—or for jet-setters just back from England. (502) 636-5340

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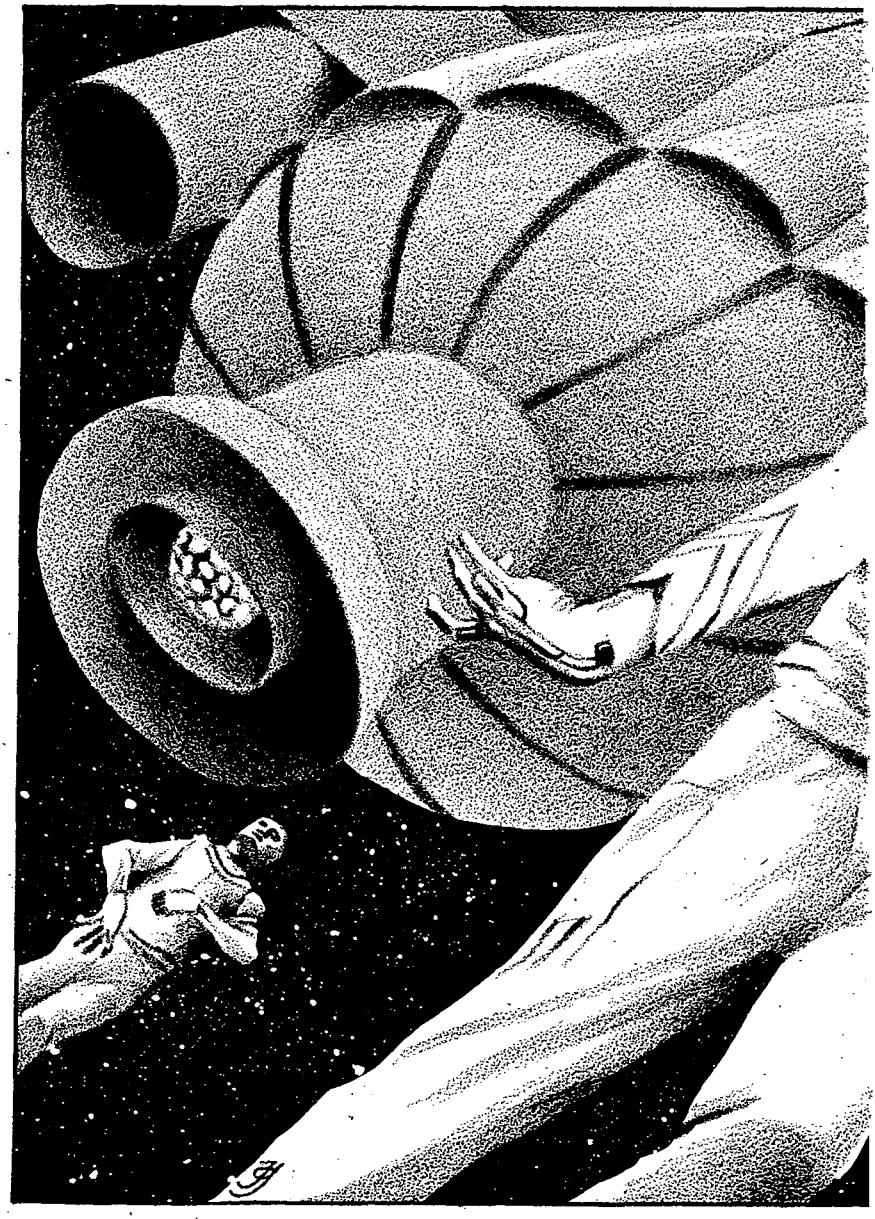

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by Stephen Leigh

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Mr. Leigh reports that he and his wife, Denise, have increased their family by one cat; they now have two. The author has almost completed one novel and is about half-way through another; which one will be finished first, he cannot say. The title, "When We Come Down," is his wife's, a result of her offer to try to do better than his.

For some odd reason, it always seems to be night when we come down.

Creatures of darkness, we: laughing and shouting to announce our unwanted presence to the nightfog and empty facades about us. It is, after all, a strange sensation to walk again. We aren't the most graceful of land creatures. In our stilted and economical manner, we strode (they would call our gait 'bumbling') along the streets, slowly gaining the feeling of being ship-free. The back of my neck itched where the input jacks were grafted, and the fog enveloped us in its damp embrace. Not a fine welcome, but as friendly as ever.

For me, each new location becomes a stage setting, a two-dimensional backdrop peopled by stage characters with stock lines, stock faces, and stock mannerisms. A port is simply a few streets lined with warehouses and a few bars catering to BP's, ground crews, and port workers. They're variable only in the most superficial ways and are held away by the cities like a person holding something distasteful at arm's length. You can exchange them world for world and fail to notice the difference. Here, the fog shrouded us and held us in. We moved in a contained world with shadowed hulks of buildings we felt more than saw, and when we passed under the infrequent hoverlamps, the light gilded the fog so that we walked (in our hobbling, limping way) through a bath of silver phosphorescence.

I didn't even notice the name of the bar. We went in, tendrils of fog twisting like grey scarves before us. Raj and Moret went to get drinks while Cara and I found a table in the corner of the BP alcove. It was a typical port tavern. A few longshoremen and crewmembers jostled around the main bar with excessive and grandiose gestures, talking loudly over a holotank set behind the bar. The holotank was out of kilter. A group of musicians gyrated in unison with their ghost images to a distorted and muffled song,

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while bands of interference sparked through and around them like an incandescent storm.

The walls of the place seemed to exude smoke and the ridges of the much-carved tables were caked with the grime of decades. The graffiti of predecessors shouted in the obscene clutter, the newer obliterating or embellishing the older. The chair on which I sat wobbled. The table was canted at an awkward angle, already drunken.

Not a friendly place, but as friendly as ever.

Raj and Moret came back with a tray laden with drinks and a few joints. As usual, the BP alcove was situated so we could sit and (in our offensive clumsiness) be away from the general energy and commotion of the tavern. Voluntary segregation, that, by consent of both parties. They call us cripples, hunchbacks and jacks and regard us, at best, as offensive to their tender sensibilities—but their oh-so-natural movements would destroy a convoy or wreck a ship. Of course, it's important to remember that this is the port. The hostility isn't (generally) so overt in the cities. They're too damned polite. At least here we know where we stand and nothing, even animosity, is hidden.

Moret was talking. I'd been watching the holotank since my head seemed to have come down that way. It went blank and dark except for the spray of static. A few longshoremen argued over which selection to play next and finally, with extravagant gesticulation, slipped a credit into the slot. A phalanx of dancers cavorted in the interference to a bass rumble. I turned away.

". . . said that the BP was in pretty bad shape. Some computer foul-up and the stasis died halfway down. Actually, it's surprising she managed to bring it down intact. But, of course, try to tell the company that."

The joint was slowly going around. Raj proferred it to me.

"Jairg?"

I declined with a shrug and he gave it to Cara.

"She could sue, but it wouldn't do much good, right? Well-paid, but not well-treated, that's us. What court's going to rule in favor of some damn BP?" Cara's face is golden-brown and, if you look closely, you can see a blond down like velvet over her entire body. Her dark eyes glanced at me.

My turn. "Yah, she wouldn't have much chance. I remember one bio-pilot that *did* sue, but the court ended up saying it was his error. But why expect the courts to be any different than the rest of humanity? This Deo, the one you keep talking about, Raj;

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maybe he could do something." I brought my glass to my lips. The talk, in its intricate pattern, flowed past me.

"Hey, listen, maybe he could. He's a BP himself, and he's managed to get the Alliance to admit that there is prejudicial treatment of bio-pilots. That's a step. In any case, you'll get to meet him in New Aberdeen." Raj passed the talk along, the niceties that fill the void between meaning. None of us were really listening. After a flight, we're far too involved in relaxing, in letting our muscles control a body rather than a ship. The casual nonsense makes it easier to pretend we're just folks, just a happy family trying to relax. I know Raj, for instance, he of the dark, wide features—he's been part of the Team since we lost Mark a few Standards back. I know that inside he's working some problem in tri-logic. He is, after all, one of the very few that understands that esoteric field and universities are always vying for his services. Why he doesn't quit piloting, I don't—no, I do. Like all BP's—bio-pilots—he distrusts those others, those people that don't know what it is to be a creature of space, and he's making incredible amounts of money piloting, *and* he doesn't want to face the hostility/pity/hatred of the normals. Myself, my field is Terran pre-Alliance music. I've had my offers to quit, also.

So we talked of nothing and sipped our drinks, occupying ourselves with ourselves.

I don't know how long it was before we noticed the quiet in the other part of the tavern. We all became aware of it at once, realizing that we could only hear one other voice over our conversation and the garble of the holotank. Cara stopped in mid-sentence (something about a game of Vari-Resolve tonight), though none of us moved. Only our eyes danced in communion. Finally, I glanced up.

The mob of people in the bar had stopped milling about and shouting. They were standing silently, looking embarrassed or interested. One tall mechanic—he was wearing a port coverall and I could see stains where the dirt shield had leaked and grime had marbled the fabric with uneven stripes—was shouting in discordant counterpoint to the holotank. Two companions—dressed similarly—were trying to restrain him, but he shrugged them away and faced us with alcoholic rage.

"Leave me alone, dammit! Look at the cripples sitting there. Hey, jacks! Oh, now they look." That was my head coming up.

He strode forward a few steps as the holotank dimmed, died, and was resurrected with a fanfare of brass agony. His two

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friends, limpets, clung to his arms. He leaned over the railing to the alcove and gripped it. I watched his knuckles whiten as his companions vainly tried to pull him away. We could smell his breath.

"Let go! I know what I'm doing. Hey, jacks! You frigging cripples, go plug yourselves into an open line to nowhere. Come on, let's see if any of you can move like a real human. How about you, lady? Eh? You want to see how—"

Raj had turned until he faced the man, and now he rose to his feet as the drunk raved and his acolytes tried to drag him back to the bar. As Raj stood—standing a little left of vertical—the room went quiet except for the now-low muttering of the mechanic. He impaled the silence with a forefinger.

"Why don't you go back to the bar, mech? You've had too much to drink, neh? Your mind is fuzzy. Let your friends take you back, huh? We'll even buy your next drink."

"Listen to him, Bard. Come on, let's leave 'em alone." One of the men pulled at the drunk's arm, but he thrust him away.

"Nah." The mech pulled himself erect. "I don't care to look at the half-humans. It's bad enough seeing 'em while I work. Why don't you crazies just slither on out? Neh? I'm inviting the cozy company of corpses to leave. If I made as much money as BPs, I could buy drinks too."

None of us had really moved. Raj's finger still pinned air. Not like the common folk, no. Our training tells us to move only when we have to, and then slowly. The habits are too deeply ingrained to change at whim. So we sat, while the drunk raved.

(I caught Moret's eye. "Want to leave?"

"Might as well. Isn't going to get any friendlier in here.")

The drunk was still shouting at Raj, but Raj had turned away. I suppose the mech felt insulted that we were going to ignore him. He flung his glass with a snarl of warning. It just missed Raj, passing a few millimeters from his left ear and shattering against the wall behind him. Raj hadn't moved—there wasn't any need to.

"Let's go, Raj."

Raj is the youngest Team member, the one least used to the covert animosity, and also the one with the least time to have become settled with BP habits. Perhaps that's why he did it. I know for a fact I couldn't have.

The drunk was shouting. "Hey, if I ever have a deformed kid, maybe he can be a BP and support me in my old age. Neh?" He laughed, looking about for others to join him in celebration of his

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zesty repartee. Nobody did. "A deformed, crazy kid," he repeated.

Raj spat in the man's direction. Spittle mottled the floor. "He'd be more human than you."

And then, as quickly and as abruptly and as gracefully as any of them, he walked from the alcove, past the mechanic, and out of the bar. He barely limped. Silence once more birthed, swelled, and burst of its own weight. The noise and talk, in a somewhat forced hilarity, began to reach former levels. The manager—she'd come out of her office at the tail end of the disturbance—shut herself away again. The roboi flung drinks at thirsty hands. The holotank wailed in ignorant distress. Pitchers of ale ringed the tables.

You write with your right hand? Try writing as fast and as well with your left. That's habit. BPs walk slow and weird, our neurons misfiring. And that's worse than habit: it's training, psychological re-enforcement, and biological manipulation. Raj walked from the place like any normal on a stroll through the Aelysian Gardens. We knew what it took, and they knew as well. A fine exhibition, that.

Yet it slew the evening. I gave a shrug, encompassing all the comments we could have made. We tried to regain the banter of earlier, but our words died of their own meaninglessness.

Cara stroked the dewed surface of a glass. Light prismed on her fingertips.

Moret's eyes skittered across faces.

The holotank chattered, faltered, and began again.

We recited our excuses. We had the flight into New Aberdeen tomorrow and I wanted to rest. Cara wanted to see if the hostel library had any literature on Vari-Resolve strategy. Moret wanted to find Raj. The litany of boredom. Mea culpa.

"Let's just head back to the hostel. We could sit in the lounge there, bribe the roboi to find us something to drink." I pushed my glass away and smeared moisture across the uneven tabletop. "Cara? Moret?"

"Yah, I'll go." Moret accepted with a glance. "Raj is probably there by now. Here, Cara, you pay the roboi. This'll cover Raj, too."

Paper rustled and changed hands. We slowly stood and hobbled our way to the door. I glanced around for the mech who'd caused the trouble, but couldn't see him. I hadn't remembered his leaving, but then I hadn't been watching. Insults were common enough.

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Outside, they'd put on the conditioners over the city, and it had alleviated the fog over the port. Only a few tendrils snaked through the spheres of light, though the glow of the port smeared the dirty clouds meshing the stars.

We nearly stumbled over Raj, looking up as we were, as we turned a corner between the vacant faces of buildings.

Cara breathed and swallowed a curse. "Raj?" Somewhere between question and horror.

Blood, black in the twilight darkness, shimmered in small, twisting rivulets from his nose and mouth. Welts were dark where the clothing had been ripped and torn. He was a mess, but his chest heaved and his eyes opened as we knelt. Cara muttered under her breath.

"Jairg? I kinda tripped and fell." Raj's laugh became a cough and he spat blood. Moret wiped his face with a sleeve.

"Look, just get me back to the hostel," Raj said. He struggled to sit up and did so with Cara's help. "They've got a medi-doc there. Half an hour and I'll be ready to go in the morning. No sense bothering Port Security?"

I glanced at Cara. She shrugged. I looked at Raj. "Yah, I guess. Think you can walk?"

"Yah. Left arm's broken, though, I think."

"Who did it?"

"What? You mean the guy I tripped over? Dunno, it was dark."

"Sure. I guess it was."

Between us, we got him up and walking. We stuffed him into the medi-doc. It took an hour and then some, but he came out looking healthy. In the morning, we broke orbit for New Aberdeen, leaving another nameless port behind.

As friendly as ever.

§ § §

New Aberdeen was certainly new, which made a certain amount of sense, I suppose. It had only recently been terraformed, and unlike most worlds that labored under the cumbersome bureaucracy of a local (world) governmental system *and* the overseeing of the Alliance, it was under direct Alliance control. It makes it easier, they say. The port was a collection of derelict antiques and virgin equipment which had yet to see much use, and the Port Authority didn't quite have the knack of handling traffic. It took us nearly all day to get down, and then I spent two more hours trying to locate the proper official to authorize my chit, draw our pay, and pick up the next assignment from our company.

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The city was distant—over the horizon, no less—and connected to the port only by the spidery length of a monorail. It hauled cargo, for the most part. Nobody seemed too anxious to go to or come from the city.

I was sitting around a table in the hostel lobby, ostensibly reading but actually staring at the walls (will they ever color them anything but glossy salmon pink?). Cara and Moret sat across the width of the room, playing Vari-Resolve, a game I've never been able to master despite the tutelage of gentle Cara. The rules change every five minutes or so in accordance to another set of rules, which are themselves governed by rules altered by the time of day, how long the game has been played, the number of players in the game and what seems to be a dozen or so other esoteric factors. Just to claim to have some glimmering of the rules seems accomplishment enough to me, but to be able to derive strategy. . . .

Raj had gone into the city to find Deo. He came back a few hours later with the man in tow. They sat at the table with me. Deo had an unlabeled bottle with him. He didn't offer to share.

"So this is your Team Master, Raj," he said, after we'd exchanged names and pleasantries.

"Yah, the best in the business."

I arranged my features to look properly modest and embarrassed.

"Of course." Deo winked at me and wiped a hand over the back of his neck. I saw two things then that told me how long Deo had been around. The back of his neck was tinged with rust from the inputs—and it's been a *long* time since they used brass-gold plated steel for jacks, and it takes a *long* time to wear away the brass-gold to the point where the steel can rust. And Deo moves so well. The BP habits, long-disused, are wearing away also. Old. "You should know by now that your Team Master is always the best." He turned to me. His eyes were alive and constantly moving and I felt an instant liking for him. "Isn't that right, Jairg?" His voice was rough-edged.

"So they tell me." We nodded to each other.

"I've been telling these people what you've managed to do for BPs in the Alliance, Deo." Raj settled back in his chair and looked over at Cara and Moret. Deo followed his gaze.

"Who's winning?" Deo asked.

"I don't know."

Deo took a long drink from his bottle. The colorless liquid

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swirled and disappeared rapidly. I allowed myself to look impressed. "What do you think of my political manueverings, Jairg?"

"I don't know enough about them to have an opinion. And Raj is prejudicial when you're the subject."

"That so?" Deo turned from me back to Raj. "I hear you had some trouble at your last stopover."

"A bit. A mech and I had a minor altercation. The usual."

"You do anything about it?"

"What's there to do?" Raj shrugged as Deo took another long drink from his bottle, keeping his eyes on Raj. BPs drink and smoke, maybe more than a normal, but I hadn't seen anyone guzzle it like that for a long time. And he still wasn't sharing. "What do you want us to do, Deo? Call the local police? Fight back? Hey, Deo, I may be a new BP, but I know better than to get physical with a normal."

"And you, Jairg? Did you do anything about the insult to one of your team members?"

That stung. I began to think that maybe Deo had had a bit much. This was a diplomat? "I do what I can to protect my people. I've been a BP for fifteen Standards. I've learned that the best way to stay in one piece is to say nothing. There're laws everywhere, and no one's going to do anything drastic. This isn't genocide fostered because we're a different religion or a different race or lifestyle. To them, we're not *human;* we're a technological sideshow, half-machines. You ever treat a holo like a person?" I hadn't started out intending to sound bitter, but I ended that way, spitting my words out. I suppose the rancor isn't that far below the surface in any of us. "You can sit there and spew out homilies and bad advice: I've done it a few times myself, though the Alliance's never asked me to work for them." I eyed the bottle meaningfully.

Deo looked down at the bottle. He took a long careful swallow and set it back down. Across the room, a bell chimed on Cara's Vari-Resolve board, heralding a rule change.

Deo smiled at me. "I'll agree with one thing. It isn't like any old prejudice. It's economically based and technologically engendered. Trouble is, culture is just a thin veneer, and we—all of us—still turn to brute strength as a last resort in determining who is better than whom. We just happen to have that outlet for frustration taken away from us. The normals already think we're little better than biological robots, imperfect and crippled imitations of

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humanity. It doesn't help that BPs have had psychological revamping. We're defective and *crazy*—but we make more money than most of them, so how does that make them feel? We move in alien ways, do alien things. It's a constant first contact—and people wonder why the Alliance keeps human space from intruding on the other sentient species we've found or have found us. Oh, it's couched in pious terms like territorial integrity and such, but the truth is that we don't want to mingle with them, and vice versa. We're aliens in another guise. And the worst thing is that it's not even morals, just training." He finished what liquid was left in the bottle and slammed it down on the table.

"So we should go out and assert ourselves, neh? Push a few longshoremen around, rape a few women—" Cara looked up at that one. I apologized with my eyes. "—knock a port security force off and stomp on them. That it?"

"No." I'll give Deo credit. He was hard to antagonize. His voice was still quiet and unperturbed, if gravelly. It was as if I'd been seriously debating rather than mocking. "Let me try another tack. Raj, did you offer any resistance when they beat you?"

"You kidding? My muscles don't work that way, and you know it. Even if I had fought, what would it have done aside from making them angrier?"

Deo smiled and put a hand on Raj's forearm. Like a normal. "I'm not blaming you. I won't argue with your logic, either. But don't you see how that affects our situation? We don't offer any resistance to verbal or physical abuse, yet we represent points of conflict. No wonder we're easy targets."

"And your solution?"

"Haven't any. But we're trying." He shrugged, looked at the bottle, and shrugged again. "There a water tap around?"

"Water?" I hoped I didn't sound as surprised as I felt.

And again, I'll give Deo credit. He could have made me look the complete fool with my prior innuendos about his drinking. But he simply nodded and stood up. "That's all my doctor allows me, and my throat's dry from talking all day in Council." He looked around the lobby. "Never mind, I'll try the kitchen. I think I can still find my way around a hostel. Be right back."

He took the bottle and left the table, walking quickly and without much of a limp or sway or any other oddity of gait. Old.

I looked at Raj, then at the ring of moisture left on the table. "I suppose I've made an ass of myself. You might have warned me."

"Didn't know. I thought the same thing you did."

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Over at the gaming table, Moret flung his pieces down in disgust as Cara laughed. She turned in her chair. "You see, Jairg? I told you I was the better player. That's five in a row over poor Moret." She yawned quickly and involuntarily. "And that's enough for tonight. You wouldn't be tired yet, would you, Jairg? I'd love some company."

She smiled. I shrugged. I wasn't particularly interested at the moment, but I didn't feel like facing Deo again. A well-developed sense of guilt, natch.

"Sure," I said.

"I'd ask Moret, but he'd just talk about the game and how he could have won."

"That's not true," said Moret in mock irritation. "You'd be crowing over your victory. Even if you'd asked, I'd've refused. Let Jairg deal with your prattling."

"You lose again, love." Cara oversmiled at him.

"Yah."

"I'll give a chance for revenge tomorrow. Coming, Jairg?"

I got up slowly. Deo hadn't yet re-appeared from the kitchens, which was just as well. "Say goodnight to Deo for me, would you, Raj? He was your training instructor, huh?"

"A fine one. He's a good BP, Jairg."

"Sure."

Cara and I hobbled to her room.

§ § §

As it turned out, we had a layover of a local day. The next morning, Raj and I took the 'rail up to the city while Cara and Moret stayed behind for their rematch.

It was a pretty town, actually, and fairly small. The grime and filth of urbanity hadn't time to settle on the buildings and streets as yet. It was set up on a human scale, too, which intrigued me. We saw no buildings more than three stories in height, and most were smaller—which happens when you have land to spare. The mass transit systems were above, lacing the sky, while the walkways handled only pedestrian traffic, the streets being narrower than usual with a central gutter to collect rainfall and debris. Small shops abounded with promises of personal treatment. I liked it, but in time it would probably turn into another neo-antiquated tourist trap to lull customers into friendliness and enthusiasm for purported honesty. I said so to Raj, but he's more idealistic than I. He scoffed.

We received the usual stares and whispered comments on our

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way. It's not easy to walk when you're not particularly built to do so. A BP's brainstem has been altered. Moving your leg may affect another unrelated muscle. It's not hooked up like a normal's. You twitch, you look like you're about to fall, you hobble, you limp, you occasionally drag a foot. It isn't graceful. I've seen it, after all, and I don't like being pointed out anymore than the normals like seeing me. I can even empathize to a certain degree. Before she died, my great-grandmother lost partial control of her facial muscles. While eating, one side of her face might suddenly go slack and her food would dribble from her mouth, down her chin, and onto her plate or lap. I was eleven, old enough to know that I wasn't supposed to laugh, though it appeared comical to me. She ate at the table one day when I had friends over. It was no longer comical at that point: I was acutely mortified. I wanted her to leave, I wanted to be scathingly critical and do anything to disassociate myself from her. For that moment, I felt loathing, but there wasn't anything either she or I could do to change the situation. It's an imperfect analogy, but I can understand the normals, I really can.

But it doesn't help.

Raj and I did what we could, but one city doesn't differ all that much from another when you only have a day to spend. You can go to the holos (but you can do that anywhere), you can eat (but food is still food, no matter how it's spiced, and you can't eat forever), or look at the architecture (but how exciting is a building when you're simply trying to waste your time as pleasantly as possible?).

Midday found us bored. We were in a curio shop, being busily ignored by the proprietor and trying to rationalize why he waited on everyone but us. ("Ah, hell, Jairg. When he finished with his last customer, we were over by the stuffed wind-spiders. It looked like we were just browsing. And the lady came right up and asked him a question.") We were about to leave when the doorshield went transparent and Deo walked in.

"Jairg. Raj." Deo smiled and extended his hand. I have to say he didn't seem surprised to see us.

"Small city," I remarked. Then, "Hey, about last night. . . ."

"Forget it. I wasn't at all insulted. I'm guilty of leading you on, anyway. I could have told you earlier." A diplomat, yes.

"Strange to run into you this way." Raj shook his head. "New Aberdeen must be smaller than I thought."

"It isn't. I'll confess that I've been looking for you. Ulterior mo-

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tives. I'm on good terms with the local constabulary and I simply asked them to inform me if one of their people saw you. I wanted to ask a favor, and I couldn't reach Jairg at the hostel."

I looked at Raj. He shrugged his innocence. "You've found me. What'd you want, Deo?"

"You're going to Daphnis tomorrow?"

I nodded.

"As it turns out, Niflheim Center wants me to go there. Something about trade agreements with the Alliance. Anyway, I'd rather hitch a ride with BPs than take the commercial flight. You're faster, besides."

I suppose I looked doubtful. He hastened to speak again. "I'll—well, the Alliance—will pay you for your weight loss, and I took the liberty of clearing it with your company."

"Jairg, Deo taught me, and he's doing a lot for all of us now." Raj's voice had an edge I didn't like hearing in a fellow team member.

"Listen, no one's objecting." I spread both hands wide, as if to show them clean of any guilty stain. "And the ride's free. BPs don't need to pay." I smiled at Deo.

"Good." He sighed, and as if that changed the subject, looked around. "You folks in here to buy something?"

I looked at the shopkeeper. He appeared to have gas. At least he was scowling in our general direction. "Not really, Deo. We're about to head back to the hostel."

Deo looked from me to the shopkeeper and back. He looked as if he were about to comment, then shrugged. "Sure. Look, I've got to get back to Alliance Hall to make final arrangements. Bureaucrats don't have much time of their own. I'll see you both in the morning."

"Fine." We all exchanged handshakes and went out to the street. Deo headed back to the Hall, and Raj and I went to look for a 'rail terminal.

And, oh yes, Cara had beaten Moret again when we returned.

§ § §

Jacked in, you're a mind tethered to cold metal rather than warm flesh.

"Raj, dress up your webs. You're too close to Cara. Pull back and dissipate."

"Yah, Jairg."

I watched (through my unblinking holos) the collector webs of Raj's ship—no, that terminology is wrong. Of *Raj*—writhe in vac-

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uum. A star behind him blinked in brief eclipse as a strand of the web passed in front of it, and then a gossamer mist, a mechanical sneeze, shot from his tubes as he moved away from Cara. Two steel-bodied moths fluttering around the candle of a sun, they circled.

"Moret?"

"I'm ready."

"Fine. Check co-ordinates once again and punch."

And with a kick of the legs, we fled to the cold solace of emptiness. Then, for long hours, there's nothing. Jacked in, you wait to move far enough from the local system to crossover, giving control of your autonomic, somatic, and central nervous systems to the shipboard computer and let your mind and nervous system control the ship. Sensory input is through the afferent neurons, output (motor functions) through the efferent. Wiggle your fingers, and webs stretch. Flex a leg, and the dissipators kick in. Simple, yah? It does demand a certain personality—pre-catatonic neurosis, they say, conjuring up an image of the mentally aberrant drifting through the interstices between the stars. You have to be able to live inside yourself, that's all. A bit of schizophrenia never hurt anyone. And why? they always ask. Because it's cheaper: cheaper to let us do it than to build and maintain the hardware to run the ships by themselves.

Economics, the mover of men, as Deo might say.

We'd rigged up an extra set of jacks for Deo, in my ship. It let him eavesdrop on everything, though he had no control of the output. It was strange, knowing that this voyeur was watching through your eyes and feeling through your skin. But it made amends. I felt I owed Deo that much, and I know he was pleased to find that he wasn't going to be a blind, lonely passenger.

So you work your tri-logic, you let the computer scan for your music (though Deo asked me to call up a history text for himself). You do it because it's easier than unjacking and realizing how bored you should be. That's for the rich, those with the prettily-enameled and bejeweled grafts that run their gaudy and inefficient yachts. An oddity, that: you'll find spinal grafts only with two segments of the population, the BPs and the very rich. The laborers and the idle. The slightly crazed and the slightly sane.

I was the ship for a long time, feeling the tidal flow of emptiness, watching the stars alter their color ever so slightly as we accelerated. I rolled my eyes back and saw the others, creatures of emptiness like myself, cleaving the ocean that was our element. I

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waved—a particularly human gesture—and they acknowledged with movements of their collectors. It was good to be a ship again, a sentience suited to cold and vacuum, knowing my reflexes were right and suited for my purposes. As always, I wished briefly that it could remain this way, that I could graze forever in the hydrogen pastures of black and not have to go back and make the human actions, the human noises. (Remember the training, Jairg. That way, madness. Remember that a BP known as Knud once refused to unjack and ran for three years—his time—before they could find and control him, and he was never sane or coherent afterward. They tell you that tale a hundred times. And yet—how could they judge his sanity? He had truly become an alien being. His logic wasn't theirs, his joys and sadnesses not pale human things.)

I was ship, I was leviathan leading my band of fellow ships. This was natural, this was right.

Maybe.

§ § §

We crossed-over. Jumping up the quanta to the land where energy shivers in icy spectrums that rain and fall, breaking against my sides with shimmering, treble sighs. Here was no emptiness, but rushing scarlet currents, vortices of the purest lapis lazuli. Hungry, we fed ourselves, dipping into the sparkling streams with our collector/hands, taking in power and exulting in our fitness for this place. It is home, but a home in which we can stay only for moments, for it fills us and assaults us with its wonders, and sensory overload takes place quickly. Already the computer is counting the seconds before we have to descend from our heaven back to reality.

We cavorted: Cara, Raj, Moret, and I. And Deo. Inside me, I could feel his rising exultation. I knew he wished he were truly a ship and not a mere observer. Others wonder why teams are so closely knit, so tight a social organization. They never see us here. We nuzzled each other, rubbed collectors gently over metal skins, feeling the kinship that only BPs can feel, that ships can experience. Sexual metaphors pale, yet that is how it is termed by the psychologists—an intercourse, a communion. They say it's simply a modification of normal behavioral patterns, that they've installed the mental triggers that give us pleasure here and that all we see is a fantasyland of their invention overlaid on reality so that we feel pleasure in being here—much as instinct turns mating into a pleasurable survival trait.

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In other words, all we see here is a sham.

No! This is different.

"Jairg?"

"Yah, Cara?"

"Brush me behind the holos. There. That's it." She shivered. "Deo, how do you like being back?"

"It's glorious. Better than I remembered. Thanks, Jairg."

"You're welcome." I felt like I was talking to myself. I was.

I brushed Cara again, just to be sure, before she dissipated away and hid behind a rainbow curtain of light that blinded my sensors. I could hear her laughter, but there's no sense of direction to the com-units. (And the technicians would explain that Cara had a minor shielding dysfunction that translated as an itching to her, and that I had just replenished the shield at the contact point. Wrong. I know how it feels, the caress of a warm hand against you.)

And through the pleasure was the inexorable voice of the computer over the com-units. Amber lights flared into existence behind my eyes, warning me.

"Time to go. You have the co-ordinates. Y5-D54-W9. On my mark."

From the others came affirmation. I even heard Deo's voice. Old habits.

"Fine. Mark in three seconds." I counted. "Mark."

Back down, back to emptiness, to reality. The last touch of the quanta grazed my skin, warming me. I shushed it away with a gentle, reproachful touch of a hand and went fully down. The stars—changed now, so far from where we'd last seen them—gazed coldly at me, and I stared back.

§ § §

Down again, and of course the port happened to be on the nightside of Daphnis. We washed the imagined grime of the flight from ourselves in the hostel. Odd, that. We always feel dirty after a flight, as if we've defiled ourselves in some way. I suggested going up to the city; Raj and Moret declined. They were going to stay at the hostel. Deo was going to go to Alliance Center and report in before coming back to the hostel. Cara said she'd come with me.

We walked for awhile, looking about—I'd been here before, Cara hadn't—absorbing what sights there were. The buildings were high, towering over us and more ostentatiously ornamental than I care to see with lighted facades and glowstone pillars. The

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town square (yah, a beacon of the past) had a lifianstone sculpture by d'Vellia, but so do many other cities. We talked softly to ourselves and tried not to notice the pressure of people trying hard not to stare at us. They'd like to satisfy their curiosity with a long gaze, but they're too self-conciously polite to do so. That, at least, is different in the port. There they stare with unmasked animosity, and you stare back.

And after awhile, through a pastiche of apathy disguised as unselfishness ("You have anything particular in mind?" "No, I'll go wherever you want." "Look, I don't care, what do *you* want to see?" "Whatever you want."), we went into a nightclub just off the square, where through a dirt-streaked weathershield, we could watch the night denizens prowl the streets.

The club had live music instead of the canned holotank, which meant we were going to come out with a lot less credit than what we brought in. I was already in a sour mood, and I tried to convince myself that I wasn't so much upset with myself for not having picked another place as I was mad at Cara for having allowed us to come in here. We sat, and I ruminated over a drink, grunting monosyllabic replies to Cara's bright chatter.

The group was good, weaving a playlet by Hausse into a musical web. Bassoons groaned, tympani rumbled. Players cavorted in red light so intense and saturated that it seemed liquid, while a narrator declaimed in electric blue from center stage, wrapped in a molecular film that shifted through the spectrum, went transparent, and then began again. Rainbows chased themselves over his body. They played well, they acted well, the staging effects were passable—and as usual, they worked through a fog of conversation and disinterest. I tried to watch them and listen to Cara at the same time and succeeded in doing justice to neither. It's easier to do two things at once when you're jacked in.

After awhile, the band took a break and Cara realized I wasn't listening. She went over to a floater-game by our table and began playing. It was some illogical variant of an idiot's conception of a space war. You maneuvered a dot of light (your craft, of course) through a holographic field laced with mines, and you tried to destroy the 'enemy' ships before they paid you the same compliment. A counter to one side tallied points while lights exploded in miniature nebulas and stars blossomed into impossibly colored flowers of novas. A very pretty and nonsensical toy that wasted your credit very well.

Bells chimed in happiness as Cara banked her ship in an im-

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possibly tight turn between two enemy ships.

Watching her, I wasn't immediately aware that someone was behind me. I heard the rustling of cloth and the breath, but the club was crowded and it wasn't anything unusual.

"You're a BP." Statement: soft contralto. I liked the voice and hated the approach.

"I'm not a ballerina." Which is a traditional reply to that opening gambit.

I hadn't turned. I watched the economical movements of Cara as she played the floater. Points (in chartreuse) were mounting every second. She hugged the machine, her fingers light on the several controls. An excellent BP—she wasted no energy.

The voice behind me came to my side. I caught a side glimpse of blue-tinted flesh wrapped in gauze. "May I sit?"

Watching Cara, I did nothing. The woman (Twenty? Thirty?) looked at me, then at Cara, then back to me. She shifted her weight from one leg to another.

She sat.

I turned my head and looked pointedly at the chair. "You're welcome."

"You didn't say one way or the other." She brushed auburn hair from her large eyes. On her left side, it was cropped close to the skull and on the other, catching the light, it smoldered on her shoulders and fell like strands of smoke to her waist. Every inch of exposed flesh was pastel blue. She looked like a fragment of sky.

And I realized I'd stared too long. I moved my eyes away, trying to remember what she'd said. Finally: "I'm Jairg." Which could as easily have been 'what's your name?' or 'you enjoy the club?' or 'have a seat.' Choose your cliche.

"I'm Linnea. You just in?"

Bells chimed and cannons barked on Cara's game. I nodded. "Yah, a stopover for a few days."

"Part of a team?"

"A four-member, working for Moache, Unlimited. That's one of my people over there." I inclined my head toward Cara.

A ghost of some expression passed over her face. She looked at Cara hugging the floater as a galaxy exploded before her eyes. I followed her gaze. Cara was still racking up points, and I noticed she'd won a free game from the machine. Cara looked up briefly, glanced from me to Linnea, and smiled with a raising of her eyebrows. She turned back to the machine.

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"She's good at that." Linnea's voice brought my attention back to the table again.

"You should see her play Vari-Resolve."

She was looking at my empty glass. "Want a refill?" She caught a passing server even before my shrug and punched her credit numbers. The dispenser spat out a glass.

"Thanks."

She should have smiled, but didn't. There was a silence while I waited and her doe eyes surveyed the room.

"I have jacks myself." Her voice was pitched a third too high, as if she were rushing into something she hadn't intended to reveal.

"Really? You don't act like a BP."

"Because of the way I move? Look." She turned her head away, sweeping the half-waterfall of her hair from the back of her neck. I saw what I expected to see—the glittering, worthless connections of an inter-shuttle or rich boat descending her neck and disappearing into the shoulderline of her clothing. Polished and clean and gleaming with status. So she was rich.

She turned back to me and the hair on her right side fell back into place. She brushed the stubble above her left ear. I repressed an urge to lean back in my chair. Cara's machine wailed.

"I'm sorry," I said. (She smiled, then. The teeth were tinted the palest of blues.) "You still don't act like a BP. What you're doing now would tear a ship apart."

She stopped drumming fingertips on the table and folded her hands. As far as a ship is concerned, that wasn't a much better alternative.

"I haven't used them much."

"So I saw." It was nothing new, after all. A lot of people use the jacks to attract BPs, but those kind of deviants usually hang around the port. BPs have been used sexually for Standards—no accounting for tastes. She was nervous now, the opposite pole of the woman that had first sat down. If she'd done this before, she hadn't done it often. And I wasn't interested.

"Look," I said finally, when another silence threatened to smother us, "if you're looking for companionship, I'm not your person. Why don't you try down at the port, huh? There's a few other teams in."

Her eyes blinked once, twice, as if it took a moment for the import of my words to register. Then, softly—"No, you've got it wrong."

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"Yah? Then what are you after?" Snidely, with a certain archness to it that even I didn't like. I mean, we get lonely too, and I've had my liasons with people like her before, and if anything, they're worse off than we are. I made internal apologies. It was late, I was tired, I didn't like the crowded club.

"Jairg, I can make it worth your time. I—"

"Forget it, Linnea." Simply. Flatly. Handled with my usual subtlety. I rose and went over to Cara, rapt amidst flashing stars and exploding spacecraft.

"Let's go, neh?" Brilliant yellow dazzled my eyes, fading through the spectrum.

"You're crazy! I've won three . . ." and she caught a glimpse of Linnea. "Oh, I was getting tired of it anyway, wasn't I? It's just a simple game."

We were almost out of the doorshield when Linnea raised her head and spoke loudly through the twilight atmosphere. "That was a mistake, cripple. We're not good enough for you? You going to bed with your twisted friend?"

We didn't stay to hear more. Heads were turning our way. I shoved Cara into the night and followed her. Even after we'd passed the door, we could hear shouting and ranting inside.

I tried to hurry Cara along, to go back to the port. I hadn't liked the menace I'd heard in the woman's voice, but Cara was content to walk about, looking at the same night scenes we'd gazed at earlier.

"Jairg, you're being paranoid," she said to my argument that we might run into more trouble. "Why bother yourself because of one frustrated normal?"

"Hey, she was rich."

"So? We're not poor. Look, we're out of that place. What else can she do?"

We argued, futilely, a few moments as I walked as quickly as I could while she half-ran to keep up.

I don't really know why I felt such trepidation. I kept waiting for shadows to merge and create a band of angry and self-righteous pursuers. I expected Linnea to leap shrieking from every cornice and bury sharpened (blue) teeth into me, tearing at my body with (blue) fingernails like steel. I waited for the sound of footsteps behind us and then, before we could turn, the gut-wrenching agony of a crowd-prod being stuck into my back. A warsnake lurked in every dark space ahead of us.

Amazing how fertile the paranoid imagination is.

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And nothing happened. We entered the hostel unscathed—though I couldn't or wouldn't let myself relax until we were actually within its doorshield. Deo was playing Vari-Resolve against Raj and Moret as a team, and was beating them handily. Cara squealed with delight and went over to assess the game. I followed slowly, discarding my ghosts and letting the gargoyles in my mind dissolve and fade back into their respective grey (and damp) cells.

"Look at that! He's got their Dancing Elf surrounded and even the Juggernaut can't move." Cara laughed. Deo looked pleased but not gloating—in his situation I would've been grinning in triumph—while Raj and Moret tried to explain to Cara that it hadn't been *his* fault they'd been beaten, but Moret's/Raj's (pick one) stupid move.

"You play with us and see what happens," Raj said. He picked up the Dancing Elf and held it out to her. "He's good. Better'n you."

"I'll guarantee you couldn't beat him yourself, m'Dame." Moret leaned back in his chair (against the salmon pink walls I could see a mark where the chair had hit the wall before) and gestured at the board. "Come on, Cara, we'll play him as a committee. You have the time, Deo?"

Deo shrugged. "I can always sleep during Council sessions." He smiled at his own joke. "Sure. Set up the pieces."

Cara went to drag another chair over to the gaming table while Raj and Moret began putting men back in position. Deo yawned widely, stretched, and sighed. "You want to help me, Jairg? Experience versus youth?"

"Don't know how to play," I confessed.

"You're in a team with these three fanatics"—Deo sneered laughingly at Raj. Raj ignored him—"and you've never learned to play Vari-Resolve?" He shook his head. "No better way to learn, though. Sit down and I'll teach you how to beat these people. It's the only way they'll ever respect you, boy. Even the normals play Vari-Resolve."

"I think I'll pass. I've got to go over our invoices anyway."

"It's an excellent game. As complicated as life—if you believe what the Vari-Resolve Society claims, though you have to account for their prejudice."

I shook my head.

He waved a hand, palm upward. Light touched the ridges. "The dutiful BP. I'll have to whip them myself, then."

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Cara humphed nasally. "Your move," she said. As Deo reached out to move his Field Disruptor from a fortress wall to a forward bulwark, I went over to the Com-readout desk and called up my invoice on the port computer. I began checking figures. I found a discrepancy between the computer and my own records. It took an hour to trace, peering into the sea-green screen of the readout panel.

It took Deo an additional three hours to beat the committee.

§ § §

It seemed we missed a small riot in flight. We were in orbit around Newhone, listening to radio reports since the port wouldn't talk to us and being basically lazy in our shiny bodies while we waited. No BPs were being allowed to land, said the local government. Newhone Port simply wouldn't acknowledge our presence, and we didn't have FTL transmitters to call Moache Offices and see what the company wanted us to do. We sat there and listened to news broadcasts and tried to garner what information we could. It had begun in a city pretty far from the port. Somebody (or some organization; it was never quite clear which they meant) had begun busting up anything bio-mechanical: cabbie-mechs, bio-pilots, robois—who knows what. It turned into something larger through some process or other—which isn't exactly something new. In any event, the government had decided to pursue a policy of placation (some governments not being any stronger than their fear of lost votes) and had banned biomechanical 'devices' from being imported. That included BPs.

Cara had listened to that particular bulletin. Her comment was succinct. "That's shit."

It galled all of us.

We heard that the Alliance was sending in a representative to arbitrate some kind of settlement. When, much later, we learned that the representative was one Deo ca Guerber, we were delighted. It was either sheer brilliance or simple stupidity for the Alliance to send in a former BP to quiet the minor rebellion—I didn't know which.

Deo came in a week after we'd entered the system—a local week, that is. He was on a craft laced with all the fancy hardware necessary when you don't have a BP acting as a ship. Reverse prejudice: a hardware-encrusted ship is a cold and dead mockery, a sham, an imitation. I intensely dislike having one run near me. Imagine how the normal would react if you sent a simac into one of their offices—a thing that can't communicate, doesn't work as

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well or as quickly, and costs three times as much—and tried to pass it off as something as effective as any of them?

Deo came up to visit some time later, riding a shuttle that deposited him near us and then backed off as if afraid of contamination. The Team unjacked and came over to my ship to talk. It's unnerving to unjack during flight and suddenly find yourself walking inside your guts. It takes some time to make the transition, and we pulled out alco-bulbs and drank for a while, letting small talk calm us.

Deo drifted over to the viewport—a concession to normal humanity that doesn't like enclosed spaces. A crumpled alco-bulb bobbed near him, a planet surrounded by liquid moons. I'd have to clean the damn place up afterward.

"It's pretty well over, now," Deo said.

Nobody commented on that.

He went on. "It was a stupid move in the first place, and I think the government realized it quickly. You can't put an embargo on food and essentials, and no company has the hardware to ship them to Newhone, even *if* they could afford to absorb the extra cost that would entail. They walked into the conference I set up ready to bow to any Alliance suggestions."

"Which means we can land?" Cara grabbed the alco-bulb from Raj and sipped it. She made a wry face and handed it back.

"Which means you can land," Deo repeated. "As long as you stay in the port, you shouldn't have any further problems. Are you loading right away?"

"As far as I know," I told him. "You know what suppliers are like. They think everything can wait on their whims."

"Yah, I know what you mean. There are two teams in that got stuck in the port, so you won't lack company, and in any case, I have to stick around for awhile to settle some of the little things—there'll be a fine assessed to the local government and maybe a few suits lodged against them." He shrugged. The motion took him up, from my orientation. He put a hand on the bulkhead to steady himself.

"You have to take time out for a revenge match, Deo. We still haven't forgotten the drubbing you gave us at Vari-Resolve, and Cara and I have devised a new strategy." Moret spoke from the galley. He tossed the last of the bulbs out. I caught one as it went by.

Deo dropped his serious expression. "The challenge is accepted."

"Good."

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"Look, I have to get back, and I can't spend too much time talking with you people, however pleasant it may be." (Cara executed a mocking curtsy from the middle of the room. Deo bowed in return.) "Do you want me to call the shuttle?"

"For a BP? You ride down with us. Right, Jairg?" Raj bounced off the wall and pulled his suit from the holding plate. I nodded my reply to Deo.

"Tell your shuttle to go home."

The others had begun suiting up. I motioned to Deo to follow me and went back to the comroom to jack in. (Back in the body again—snug with a lilt. Around me were the empty hulks of the rest of my team, bodies without souls. Not a pleasant sight, but the souls were coming.) Deo used the jacks we'd set up for him earlier, while I spoke into the intercom. "You folks ready?"

From the earphones: "Sure." Cara.

I cycled them out, then watched the ambulatory motes that were my team drift over to their ships. One by one they jacked back in. All was right with the Universe.

I called Newhone Port. This time they answered.

"Looks like you've solved the problem, Deo."

"I wish I could think I had."

I kicked us down.

§ § §

The hostel was no different (surprise!) than the one we'd left—and yes, the walls were the same obnoxious innocuous pink. If it weren't for the fact that Newhone Port was in winter and you could peer out the lobby windows and see drifts climbing the outside walls, we might have thought ourselves back on New Aberdeen (or Daphnis or Niflheim or Longago—your choice). Deo had gone back to Alliance Center, which was halfway across the continent. The two other teams he'd mentioned had left Newhone for their next destination, the crisis having passed. The Alliance magazines in the lobby were ancient, while the local ones weren't particularly appealing, the holo showed nothing but old movies, and the hostel library was closed for remodeling.

Boring.

I'd tried to find out when our ships could be loaded—we were supposed to haul a cargo of fossil fuels to Bond One—but nobody seemed to know when that might be. The insurrection had fouled up schedules all over the planet. Cara, Raj, and Moret played successive games of Vari-Resolve. I read the local magazines, watched the old shows. For two days.

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Very boring.

Moret was the first to vocalize the fact that we were becalmed in the doldrums.

"Why don't we go up to the city? We can catch a 'rail from the port."

"Deo told us we should stay here." Always the practical one, I told myself. Inside, my bored mind kicked the unrepentant conscience.

"It'll be safe enough, Jairg. The news has stopped talking about the 'situation' entirely." His voice added the quotation marks.

"Sure, Jairg," Cara added. "At least we can do something new. I'm even tired of Vari-Resolve, and that's saying a lot." She brushed her hair back from her eyes and yawned. I found myself suppressing one of my own.

"For the record, I vote aye myself," said Raj. Head leaning on hands, he spoke through his fingers.

In the end, I gave in. It wasn't a hard-fought battle. I ached to get out myself, despite Deo's cautions. As bad as walking around a new world is and as much as I denigrate sightseeing and/or bar-hopping, restauranting, and movie-going, it was still more appealing than sitting around the hostel any longer. I packed my latent fears in a box somewhere in the frontal lobe and smiled my permission. After all, I told myself, there's no law forbidding it, and Deo was simply suggesting we stay in the port area. He didn't put *great* emphasis on it. We went out, found the 'rail terminal for the port, and paid our fare to an aloof caricature of an attendant roboi that looked like it needed an overhaul. Limping and stumbling as is our wont, we went to find rapture in metropolitan Newhone.

It didn't look as if it would be easy to find. The city we came to—I never did learn its name—was a potpourri of various architectural nightmares. Squat and ugly geometric structures alternated with aborted and full-term skyscrapers; the streets varied in width at whim while vehicular traffic seemed to follow no law but anarchy. A dirty snowfall was the only consistency—a breccia of litter in a grey-white matrix. And there were, of course, the ubiquitous stares. People turned and actually *stopped* to watch the four of us bumbling past. We moved in a quicksilver sea of people that parted before us to let us by and then closed in silently behind. At least we'd learned one important lesson long ago: never look as if you don't notice them. To walk and gaily chatter about nothing while you're really listening to the whis-

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pered (or shouted) comments around you—that looks faked, no matter how well you try to disguise it. It's best to simply appear as though you don't *want* to hear them; which is, after all, only the truth.

The city wasn't zoned, at least not like any I'd ever seen before. Markets brushed elbows with theaters and furniture shops exchanged glares with residences across the street. One-story buildings glanced timidly at structures cleaving the sky. We walked about randomly, in tune with the city, looking for someplace to pull us in off the cold streets. Eventually, hunger made the decision. We slipped into a restaurant that was rather out-of-the-way, almost crushed between two far larger buildings in a less than affluent section. It was small; that was its main attraction. We didn't want a hundred people looking at us as we tried to eat.

There were only two people in the place, a couple that stared at us from a booth near the door as we entered. Our eyes met as we walked in, held each other for a moment in mutual dislike, and then the two returned their attention to their dinners. I could smell the sharp odor of meat sauces and the fainter tang of disinfectants, the normal aroma of a diner. The floor was well-worn, but the tiles had the look of being freshly-scrubbed. The place was clean, at least.

We chose a table as far from the other people as possible. As we sat, the table fluoresced and displayed the menu. I touched a selection of seafood and waited for my order to register, but nothing happened.

"Doesn't the table work?" I asked in general.

Raj stroked another selection. Nothing. "Guess not. Want to try another table?"

I was just about to get up and suggest we go on back to the hostel when a tall and thin woman came out of the kitchen shield. She was sweating, as if she'd been working on something physical, the full sleeves of her dress rolled up. She walked over to the table and pulled a stylus from her pocket.

"You folks really hungry? The Heimstag is good, if you've got a full appetite."

All of us looked up in some surprise. She'd spoken as if we were any of her regular customers, not a hint of anything negative in her voice. We hadn't even expected politeness, and here was nothing but undiluted friendliness. Either she didn't know we were BP's—unlikely—or she was simply a rare normal. I rubbed the back of my neck—a gesture that has overtones of obscenity in

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some circles: only BPs do it with any regularity. She looked at me with that smile still across her face.

"You need some more time?"

"Do you take the order?" Raj pointed at the table.

"Yah. The tables in here don't relay any more, so I have to come out of hiding. I don't mind, really. It's kind of nice to meet the people that are eating your food."

"You cook it yourself?" I was surprised. Not many places do that anymore.

"Sure, it's the only thing this place has to offer. It doesn't have atmosphere, certainly. Actual human-cooked meals. Quaint, neh?"

I looked down at the table again. The menu was flickering slightly. As I watched, it dimmed and faded. "You said the Heimstag was good?"

"Had it myself."

"I'll try it, then." I let my fears of the city ponder this for awhile. It looked as if Deo's warnings to stay in the port had been unnecessary.

The woman's stylus moved. She looked at Raj. I glanced at the couple in the booth. If the owner was friendly, she was an exception. (Inside, my paranoia shouted derision at my moment of optimism.) The couple was looking at us with something bordering on disgust. As I watched, the girl said something to the man and began to get up. He spoke back to her, nodded, and they both stood. The thin woman looked up from taking down Raj's order and called to them.

"Leaving so soon, Miffta?"

The man looked at her, then us. "Not hungry any more." He buckled his weathershield to his waist. "Money's on the table, Ulla." Their arms around each other, they went out.

The owner—Ulla—watched them go, gave the slightest of shrugs, and turned back to us.

"Hey, we're sorry about that." Cara inclined her head toward the booth.

Ulla put the stylus down and, both hands supporting her, leaned down closer to us. "Don't worry about it. He doesn't ever buy much or come in often, and when he does, he holds the table for hours. I won't miss him."

She straightened back up and looked at Moret. "What'd you want, then?"

The food, when it came, was as good as Ulla's treatment of us. It's not often we get to eat much other than port food or the ra-

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tions aboard ship. The difference was immense. We ate hungrily, ordered more, and spent the time contentedly sating ourselves. Ulla came over as we were finishing and sat down with us. We talked as we disposed of the remnants of the feast. It turned out that she had a brother that had become a BP. So much for al truism.

Nobody came in to interrupt us. The retaurant was quiet except for our talk, and the doorshield kept out the rumble of evening ir the city.

"You're not exactly giving the competition a heart attack," I remarked during a lull in the conversation.

Ulla looked around the room as if checking to be sure no one had come in. "Slow night. It gets more hectic later in the week Besides, all the trouble has been keeping people home."

"Must've been strange."

"Didn't hurt me as much as others. I don't use biomechs in here at all." She looked at me in sudden apology. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

I waved her apology away.

"It's so complicated," she said. "I never know how to feel. Gies my brother, he's a BP now; but I still can't see a roboi as having feelings. After all, a roboi's just a brainwipe with an overlay o simple instructions to follow. They can't do anything but what they're programmed to do. And Gies; I lived with him for years. didn't like him much. He wasn't ever communicative, wasn't ever really, well, sane or happy." She looked across to Cara. Their eyes met. Cara smiled encouragement.

"He's much better now," Ulla continued. "I've seen him since He came in when his team was here. He talks to me, now. He seems better adjusted."

We all nodded in unison. It's like walking into sudden light BPs don't like crowds and aren't socially gregarious except with other BPs, but we're socially functional to a point. And we weren't before. The Psych Guild can't cure our particular problem, but they can twist it enough. We knew what she meant.

We talked a long time, the five of us. Outside, the weather turned colder and windy. I could see snow outlining the gusts of wind, and the city was making the transition into night. The sun tipped the highest buildings with golden light, but down here it was already dark. Hoverlamps were flicking on, pooling light in the streets. Those people that walked by the restaurant weather shield were moving more quickly than they had in the afternoon

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light. And even though I felt myself becoming a living cliche, the night was bringing back my fears. I wanted the four of us to get back to the hostel.

Cara was ready to go, but Raj and Moret wanted to stay awhile and see if they could fix the table relays. I said we'd wait for them. Cara said she could find her way herself. Raj and Moret told me to go ahead, they'd be along sometime. So Cara and I said our goodbyes, tried to pay Ulla—she wouldn't take anything—and left. On the way out, I put some credits on the counter.

Outside, in the cold, I began to worry about it. "I hope she finds them."

"The credits?"

"Yah."

"You have to have something to worry about, don't you?"

"Keeps me young."

"Yah."

The cold was bitter. My weathershield seemed to let the wind in from every angle. I shivered involuntarily and wished I'd dressed more warmly. The city didn't help. The wind whipped down the streets, chasing trash and whistling a tuneless motet to the buildings beside us. The hoverlamps were throwing out a blue-white glare as cold as the wind, and the sky—when we could see it—was a charcoal grey turning quickly dark as the sun gave up the struggle. The nearest 'rail terminal was blocks away. I shivered, swallowed trepidation, and moved closer to Cara.

§ § §

The transition was abrupt, without warning. People seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. I grabbed Cara's arm, tried to run (were there five? Six? Hundreds?). We took a few stumbling steps, and they caught us easily. I found myself suddenly fighting a deluge of fists. I saw one man—a pinkish face that looked freshly-scrubbed—swing a club of some sort. It caught Cara on the side of her neck. She went down, and then I was too busy covering myself to look after her. A fist struck me full in the face, and I felt blood spurting from my nose. I could taste saltiness in my mouth.

Then I was on my knees, eyes closed to slits through which I could see fuzzy and distorted images moving. Hands pulled me back up. Something struck me hard in the stomach. I gasped for air and was suddenly and violently sick. I gagged, trying to breathe as I was hit again. I would have fallen, but they held me up. I didn't struggle—what use would it have been—and I didn't

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worry about Cara. I cared only about the pain I was feeling. After a few more minutes, I didn't even feel that.

Somewhere about then, I stopped thinking entirely.

§ § §

I came out of the 'doc before Cara. I waited for her, standing in silence with Deo, Raj, and Moret in the antiseptic waiting room. No one seemed to want to talk, to want explanations. I took it as censure, whether it was or not. They didn't want to talk to me, I thought. I'd let us go to the city, I couldn't make us wait to leave the restaurant together. My fault. So I attacked myself before they could.

"I should have kept us here in the port. It's my fault."

"Jairg." Softly, from Raj. I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"No one blames you." Moret.

Deo simply looked at me with a face I couldn't decipher. I wallowed in self-pity and guilt. "My fault." I must have muttered it a hundred times. After a time, they seemed to ingore it. After a time, I was just saying it to keep silence away.

Cara didn't come out of the 'doc for a frighteningly long time. When she did, she still had the remnants of purple bruises on her face. I hung back, but the others made a rush for her. Raj hugged her, and she started crying, though only for a moment. She saw me.

I wanted to hide. Like a kid.

"Jairg, how are you?" Her concern was achingly genuine. It hurt more than the bruises.

I shrugged, not trusting my voice. Cara bit her lip and looked like she was trying to smile. "I guess I should've listened to you, huh?" She stood looking at me. Behind her, I saw a nurse peer from around a corner at our gathering, grimace, and pull his head back. "Jairg, hey, I'm *fine.*"

"Sure," I said finally. My voice was huskier than I'd expected.

"We've got a flight out tomorrow evening," said Raj, finally, "and we're all tired. Let's head back to the rooms. How about it?" He put his arm around Cara. "Deo? Moret? Jairg?"

"I think I'll stay up a bit." I didn't feel like sleep. I had no desire to see what horrors my subconcious could dredge up for the night's entertainment.

"Sure." As she passed, Cara patted my hand. I attempted a smile.

I caught Deo on his way out and waited for the others to leave the room. "Is there any chance the authorities here'll catch

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them?" I said as the doorshield to the hostel shivered and swallowed the others.

Deo snorted in derision. Then, as if he realized how callous that must have sounded, spoke. "I doubt it. You and Cara never saw them well enough to identify them, and, besides, you'll be gone in a day. I hate to say this, but why should they bother?"

"I suppose you're right."

"Oh, listen, they'll make a pretense of checking it out—they'll have to, since I'll be riding their ass about it. They'll question a few people, check around a little, but nothing will happen."

"Damn," I muttered through clenched teeth. I exhaled loudly.

"You want absolution? I haven't got it." Deo shook his head. "I don't even blame you, Jairg. I really don't. I'm just an old man who thinks it's possible to change things. It's better than sitting around some hostel looking enviously at all the BPs that pass through. If I'd been in your place tonight, nothing much would have changed. Oh, I'd like to think that I would've kept the team together, or that I'd have resisted more emphatically when assaulted, but in the end it wouldn't have done any good."

He nodded in the direction of the hostel lobby. "Why don't you go to bed? You've got to be tired."

"No thanks. I just want to sit for awhile. Alone, if you don't mind."

"Sure."

He gave me a brief smile and went through the door.

§ § §

I've never been one for grand, useless gestures. I thought for a while of going back to the city, of searching until I found one of the people that had beaten us, and dragging the names of the others out of him before taking him to the authorities (where triumphantly they would congratulate me and round up the other bastards.) The second scenario had me prowling the dangerous sectors of the city, asking to be attacked simply by my presence and then turning on my attackers with ruthless fury and leaving them bloody and broken on the ground. The last playlet had me leading a band of vengeful BPs to the city where we bullied anyone who even looked at us oddly.

Daydreams.

Eventually, all I did was go out into the port and find an all-night tavern. I sat in the BP alcove and got very drunk. I argued with a longshoreman, and I even threw the first punch. To the surprise of everyone in the bar, and myself, the blow landed. I

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had the brief satisfaction of seeing a thin line of scarlet trickle from one nostril—I didn't even mind that I'd aimed at his chin. The 'shoreman put his hand to his nose and looked at the blood on his finger.

Then he beat the hell out of me.

But I fought back, and when it ended—with both of us thrown out of the establishment—he had more blood on him, and it wasn't all mine. Somehow, that felt good.

I strolled victoriously over to a public com and called Deo at the hostel, boasting about my first great victory for BPs. Between my drunkeness and my swollen lips, I'm surprised he understood a word of it. He told me to stay put, he'd be right there.

"Hell, Deo. I'm fine. Look, I'm gonna go see if I can find that 'shoreman. He left before I did. See ya, huh?"

"Dammit, Jairg, don't be foolish. Stay where you are. You look like you're ready to collapse. I'll be right there. Don't go wandering off."

The screen flared as Deo hung up and I shut my eyes against the sudden light. The eyelids didn't have far to go. I tried to get some idea of what I looked like in the screen, but the image that looked back from the rounded lens seemed too distorted. That couldn't be me. I examined my face with a tender hand. Deo was right, I suddenly realized; it didn't feel familiar. I leaned against the wall of the booth, weak, and waited for him.

It didn't take him long. He must've run (old: BPs do *not* run) part of the way. At least he was out of breath when he found me. I opened one eye—the other wouldn't cooperate—and tried to beam at him.

" 'Morning, Deo."

In the glow of the streetlamps, I could see his chest heave. His breathing was loud in the late night quiet, although we could hear a muffled, raucous cacophony from a nearby bar. Deo steadied himself with one hand on the booth, leaned down and drew in several deep breaths, and stood back up.

"You should see yourself, Jairg. You're a mess."

"I don't feel that bad."

"You will, if we don't get you to a 'doc soon. The alcohol'll wear off."

"Hey, Deo," I said brightly. "I actually hit him a couple times. Really." I attempted a lurching step out of the booth, but the port chose that moment to do a somersault. Deo, for some reason unaffected by the ground's gymnastics, put an arm around me and

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helped me out.

"Yah, you hit him. Look what you got in return for your investment. At least he could walk away on his own."

My emotions did an about face. I was suddenly maudlin, depressed. "Deo, I'm just tired of letting everyone walk all over us."

"I told you; there's no quick solution."

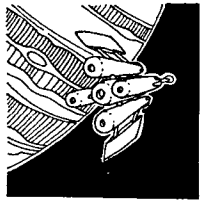
"But at least you're trying. I haven't even done that. I've just tried to avoid the situation. I couldn't even do that, tonight. Cara was almost *killed,* Deo." I didn't feel good, I swallowed hard, willing my stomach to remain dormant.

"I want to look for some answer," I continued.

"Sure. Let's get back to the hostel. You can't do anything until you're patched up."

I don't remember the walk back to the hostel. I can dimly recall the nurse in the hospital looking at me in disapproval and muttering to herself when she found that it was my second visit of the night. She ungently put me in the 'doc. I fell quickly asleep under the machine's ministrations.

Later, the bruises healed, the alcohol wrung from my brain, I went and woke up Deo to thank him. We talked for awhile, and when we were tired of talking (the dawnlight gilding the snowbanks outside the lobby windows), Deo put together his Vari-Resolve set and began to teach me how to play.



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"SF is a pulp form and dead,"
Say the gentlemen wise and well-read;
If we offer exceptions,
They slant their perceptions,
And say that it's mainstream instead.

—John M. Ford

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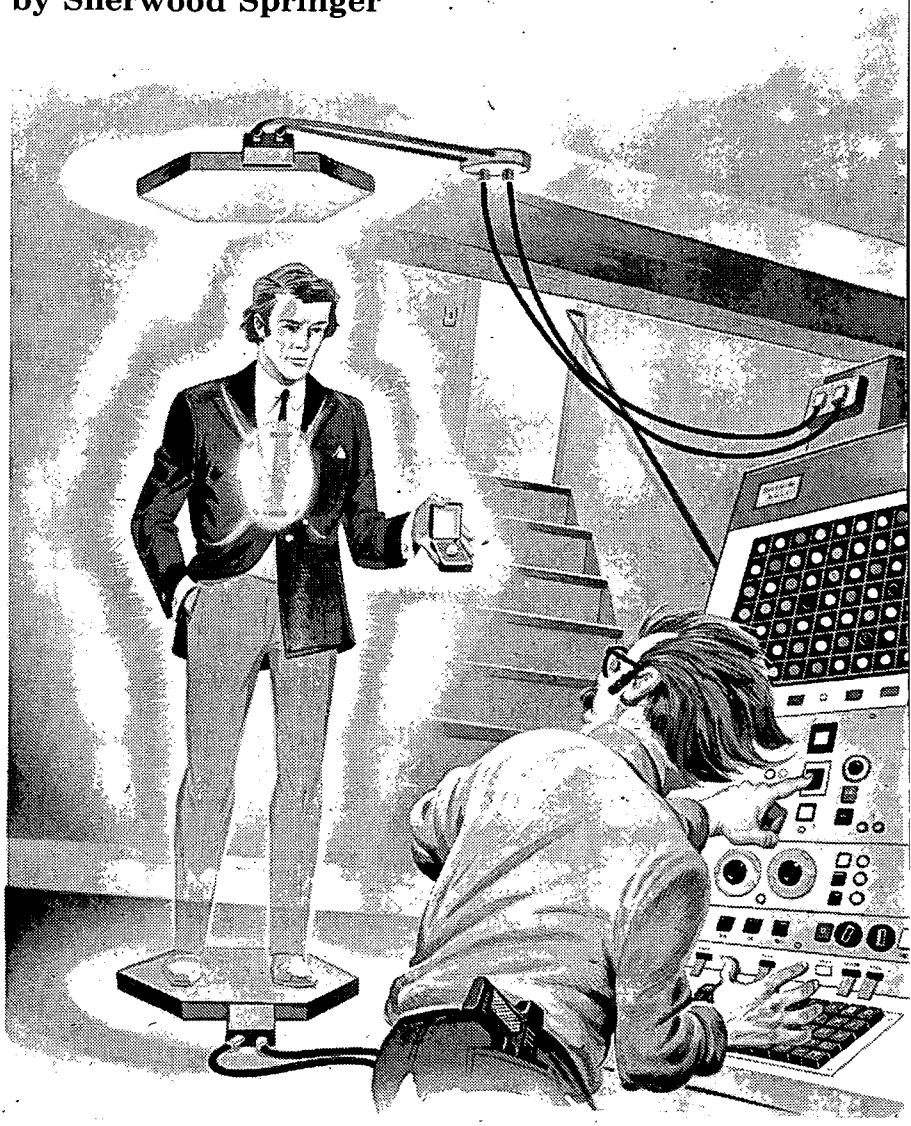
FRAGGER'S BOTTOM LINE . . . LINE . . . LINE . . .

by Sherwood Springer



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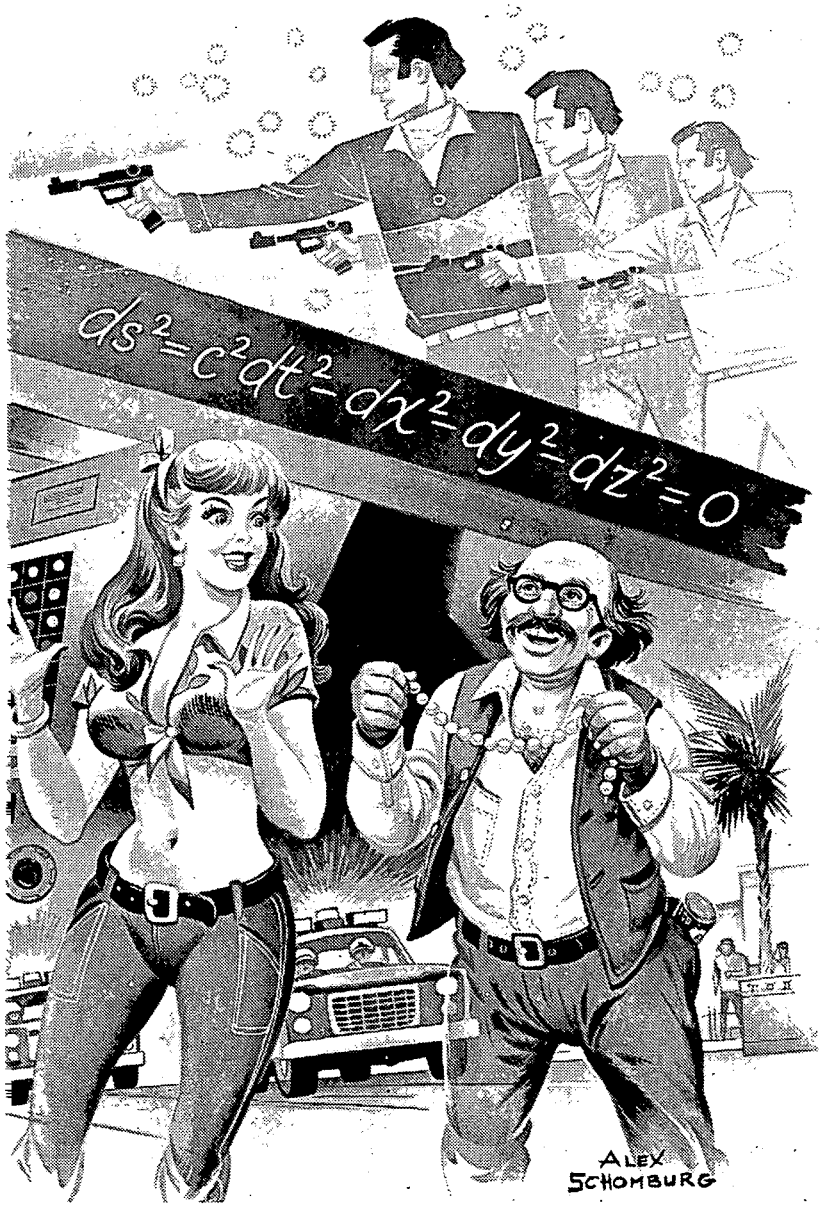

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During his zigzag career, the author has been a spelunker, printer's devil, trap drummer, sprinter, typesetter, poet, carnival barker, sign painter, music copyist, Triple A golfer, forgery expert, columnist, pool room proprietor, financial editor, publisher, and philatelist. Much of his story material is drawn from these backgrounds. But fragging, he assures us, has never been one of them.

Twice each day, Monday through Friday, at 10:14 A.M. and 2:14 P.M., Fragger Larsen would board the 83 bus at Seventh and Olive Streets in downtown L.A., ride west to Beverly Hills, debark on Wilshire, walk north on Rodeo Drive, enter Soffington's, jewelers of repute, and steal the Moon of Benares, one of the most fabulous pearls on earth.

On Saturday he would make only the morning trip. And since, barring minor complications, he would be safely back at Doc Endore's place on Bunker Hill within ninety minutes and each time he produced the pearl he was handed one hundred bucks, there was no way Fragger was going to knock either the hours or the pay.

And as for the effort involved in ripping off the Moon of Benares, it required nothing more than the ingenuity employed to get his hands on it, usually the pretense of examining it under a glass he carried, a maneuver which usually occurred in the so-called security of Soffington's inner office. Once this was accomplished, Fragger had his own hot transportation line back to the basement laboratory on Bunker Hill—together with the loot, of course.

As a matter of fact, however, there were days when he was unable to produce two pearls, or sometimes even one pearl. The Moon of Benares, it is true, was identical each time he obtained it to all the other previous Moons, but the environment through which Fragger moved tended to have unpredictable differences.

On one trip the man at Soffington's informed him the pearl recently had been sold, another time it was in the lab where an imitation was being made for Universal Studios, twice Soffington's advised him they had been unsuccessful in buying the pearl, another time the name of the jewelers was Bellini's and the clerk could only shake his head, and three times there was not even a

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jewelry store at that location. Fragger, a loser from way back, was philosophic. You can't win 'em all.

Some of the unpredictables were frightening, however. The day Endore decided to try the twenty-three slash eighteen million range, Fragger came back white and shaking.

"Christ," he said as he limped off the plate. "My feet." From the cabinet under the sink where Endore kept his brandy, he grabbed a bottle, sprawled in a chair with his shoes on a packing case, and took a stiff belt.

Virgil Endore's thick-lipped Levantine face furrowed in petulance. "Why can't you use a glass?"

Fragger grimaced. Wouldn't you know, he thought. The bastard is a genius, and he's more worried about my drinking out of his goddam bottle than he is about my damn near getting killed.

"So what happened?" Endore prodded.

"Bunker Hill, that's what happened. They lopped the top off Bunker Hill. We're fifteen feet in the air."

"What are you talking about?"

"I just told you. I fell ten feet through the air and landed on top of a parked car. Scared the shit out of some guy just getting out."

"This is nonsense. We're underground."

"Not in that range. The hill's gone, Angel's Flight's gone, all those old houses are gone. They have skyscrapers, parking lots, Music Pavilion, and a big stupid thing they call a Triforium."

Endore thought it was ridiculous, and Fragger agreed. But there was no trip to Soffington's that day. Fragger spent the rest of the afternoon soaking his feet.

After that, even though they avoided the 23/18,000,000 range, every time Fragger got on the plate for a jump he kept his finger on the transfer button at his navel—just in case. If he felt himself materializing in thin air, brrrack! he'd be back on the dispatch plate again.

§ § §

Several days later, after making his twentieth score, he came back to a silent laboratory. There was no sign of Endore, and Fragger, after waiting around for thirty minutes, decided to go for lunch, the Moon still in his pocket.

On his return, as he mounted the steps of the house on Olive Street, he bumped into a spry little man on the way out. "Sorry," he said, and brushed past him.

"Hey, just a minute," the other said. "I see you before. Are you staying with somebody?"

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"Whatta you mean?"

"I mean are you living here? I manage this building."

"Oh . . . no, I don't live here. I work for Doc Endore—in the basement."

"Endore? When'd he get back?"

"Get back? Whatta you talking about?"

"Look, I know Virgil for years. Every Sunday afternoon, chess. He's no Capablanca, but sometimes he makes good moves. So now he misses three Sundays in a row. I knock on the door, Murdo says he went away on a trip." The man spread his hands, palms up. "What's going on down there?"

"Murdo? Who's Murdo?"

"Who's Murdo? Murdo's the guy I see you with in the hall last week. Murdo works for Endore, too. What's the matter with you? You retarded or something?"

"That was Endore with me in the hall."

The man stepped back as if Fragger carried the plague. "I'm talking to a flake," he said, and hurried down to the street.

Fragger, with his hand in his pocket, stood there watching him until he made a left into Angel's Flight. Then he sat down on the top step. After a while he brought the pearl case from his pocket, flipped the lid and exposed the luminous Moon of Benares. It was a thing of impossible beauty, a full 18 mm. in diameter, flawless, of superior lustre and refraction, and a perfect sphere. In the trade they call them eight-way rollers.

He gazed into its rosy depths. "Now it's beginning to make sense," he said. Face it, a pearl freak was one thing. A scientist capable of creating a machine like the transitron was another. That Endore could be both of them was something that had been sticking in Fragger's throat for some time.

So where was the real Endore? Dead, or . . . ? Fragger started thinking about the dispatch plate. Those alternate worlds. Hell, all you had to do was knock a man out, or mickey-finn him, drag him onto the plate, activate the machine, and he'd be gone. And if he didn't have his portable field with him there was no way he could ever return. Murdo wouldn't have to kill Endore, he could just send him out of this world!

This whole mission was getting sticky. For one thing, he'd have to watch Murdo now, and, for another, he'd better start planning an angle of his own. Fooling around with a killer could get you killed. This $200-a-day action was fine, but maybe it was just fine for a—what did the old man call him?—a flake.

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It was high time, Fragger decided, to talk to this yo-yo, Murdo. He closed the Moon's container, got up, and entered the building.

Murdo was waiting for him with his jewel case open on the table. It was lined with gray velvet, and had small compartments, nineteen of which displayed a matched collection of nacreous treasures without compare in the history of adornment. "What happened to you?" Murdo asked. Then he spotted the contents of Fragger's hand. "Oh, you got one," he said. "Good, that's twenty. Eight to go." He reached for it.

But Fragger pushed past him, strode to the refrigerator and punched open a beer. "You can have it in a minute," he said. "I want to get something straight first."

"Like what? Give me the pearl."

"Not yet. It's time you did some leveling around here. For starters, tell me how come you're such a freak about pearls?"

"I'm not a freak about pearls. It's Irene who's a freak about pearls."

"Irene?"

"That's right. My girl. She dumped me for this jerk Trusio just because he sprang for some lousy pearls. Well, by God, I'm going to show her something that'll blow her mind."

Fragger stared at him. "You're putting on this whole production just to give some broad a string of super-beads?"

Murdo started to defend his position, but Fragger cut him short. "To hell with that. You told me you were Doc Endore. You're not Doc Endore. You're a phony named Murdo. I want to know what happened to Endore. Did you knock him off?"

"Look who's talking."

"What?"

"I know all about you, too. That's why you got this job. I looked you up. That business in Vietnam. That lieutenant you blew up with a grenade."

Fragger lunged at him and grabbed his throat. "Buddy, you better watch that mouth of yours. If you know so much, you know I was cleared of all that." He gave Murdo a shake and shoved him away.

Murdo held his neck in both hands and sputtered. "Insa . . . insufficient evidence . . . that doesn't make you innocent." As Fragger started for him again, he backed off. "Hold it, will you. So I did take care of Endore. So what? So neither of us is an angel. We're into a damn good thing here. As soon as I get eight more pearls for Irene we'll work out a deal." He got two fifties from his

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wallet. "Here's your dough."

Fragger stood for a minute, then took the money, handed over the twentieth Moon and swung toward the door. "I'll think about it," he said, and left. He took the afternoon off, that night he got stoned, and the next morning he was an hour late for work. He should have stayed stoned. The day turned out to be one of the worst of his life.

§ § §

When he arrived the door was unlocked, and Murdo was nowhere around. Fragger popped some aspirin, put a wet cloth on his forehead, and stretched out on a couch.

Murdo came storming in thirty minutes later. "Where have you been? I'm all over town chasing you. Let's get moving."

Grumbling, Fragger got up, stripped, and put on his transfer field assembly—titanium alloy wires, one over each shoulder, and two through his crotch, all meeting at two oval plates, ten centimeters long, front and back, joined by a metal circlet at his waist. The front element, which contained the activating mechanism, also provided the recessed transfer button which, when pressed, generated a field that proved to be, at all times and at all places in alternate worlds, immediately congruent to the transfer plate on the floor of Endore's laboratory.

There were two transfer plates, actually—one in the ceiling, too—and the jumps were made within an invisible cylinder of subelectronic flux that streamed from one to the other. But with Virgil Endore gone, the principles that went into the mechanism's construction also were gone. Murdo, whatever experience he may have gained from working with Endore, was obviously an imbecile, although three things, at least, he could do: (a) adjust the dials, (b) activate the jumps, and (c) dream of blowing Irene's mind with a preposterous bauble. That first day, faking the doctor, he had tried to explain time feathering to Fragger, the theory that alternate worlds were the result of a continuous series of verge points in the time stream. The only thing that had made any sense that day was the fat wallet that Murdo carried. Big bills have a way of doing that.

Fragger donned his clothes and went into the lab where Murdo was fidgeting at the controls. He stepped on the plate. "Shoot," he said. Murdo closed the switch, and there was a sound like the cracking of a frozen tree branch as air crashed into the sudden vacuum. Fragger was gone, and the room smelled of ozone.

He was standing on the dirt floor of a basement, cobwebby and

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untenanted, quite similar to others he had seen before. In the dim light from a grimy window he was oblivious to details as he took the stairs two at a time and, with one of his keys, opened the simple lock on the basement door. Peering out and seeing no one in the hall, he quickly made his way to the street. In a few minutes he was riding Sinai, one of the two Angel's Flight cars, down the 33-degree slope to Hill Street.

Seventy minutes later he stepped off the bus at Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Standing in front of a shop window, he ran a comb through his businessman's cut, straightened his tie, and brushed the shoulders of his bond salesman's suit. Like army life, Murdo had pointed out, jewel heisting required a uniform. To shop for the Moon of Benares you had to look the part. In establishment eyes, Fragger looked the part.

He started up Rodeo Drive, probably the last street in America where you can still window shop at night. Police protection is said to be so good in Beverly Hills that a resident himself can be arrested just by stepping into his own alley to open his trash can after midnight.

Something was happening up the street, Fragger noticed. Two police cruisers were in front of Soffington's, one of them double parked. Fragger continued his pace, intending to maintain the attitude of a casual shopper, walk around the block, and write this trip off as a loser. After all, whatever was going on in this time line, it didn't involve him.

Several spectators had gathered on the sidewalk. One officer inside the cruiser was listening to the toneless voice of a dispatcher on the police radio while another stood looking at his fingernails. Two more were questioning a long-haired girl in jeans. In the doorway of the jeweler's shop a dapper man with a pencil mustache was gesticulating to a fifth officer. Fragger recognized the former as Bellini, who, in several other time continuums, was manager of Soffington's.

As Fragger was making his way through the bystanders, Bellini suddenly pointed. "There he is now!" he screamed. "That's him! That's the man!"

It was crazy. How could this be happening? Before he could react, three men were on him. His arms were pinned. Hands were frisking him for a gun. Could he be dreaming all this? He remembered lying down on the couch at Endore's, but—

Bellini and the other policeman were confronting him now. "You're sure this is the man who took the pearl?" the officer

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asked the manager.

"Absolutely," Bellini said. "No question about it. Search him."

"Wait a minute," Fragger said. Whatever was happening to him, it was no dream. "I was just passing. What's this about?"

"Let's see some identification."

"His name is Larsen," Bellini put in. "I already saw his identification."

"Is that true?" the officer asked.

Fragger could only stare at Bellini. How could the jeweler know his name? That idiot Murdo and his dials! This must be one of the same time lines he had already visited. But no, that would have been yesterday or last week. Why would the cops be here now? Or was there something tricky about this time jumping that neither he nor Murdo knew about? Overlapping, maybe, or a time loop or something . . . that could bring him around in a circle, or—

One of the cops removed his wallet and handed it to the officer in charge. The latter glanced at his driver's license.

"Gerald Larsen. That does it, Charlie. Cuff him and read him his rights."

It wasn't until the cuffs were clamped on his wrists that Fragger gave a thought to the transfer button. Good God. Why hadn't he pressed it when his hands were free? Well, he'd just have to luck it out now. What could they do to him? He had never lived in this continuum, so he couldn't have any yellow sheet here. He was well dressed, the gem was not on his person, and he'd stick to his story. Even if they booked him and put him in the tank, they'd have to take off the cuffs. And the minute they did that, good-bye! So, during the brief ride to the Beverly Hills police station on North Crescent Drive, Fragger good-naturedly cussed the system to his two uniformed companions, but refused to let himself get uptight about his predicament.

At the station house they booked him for grand theft, but the arresting officer, Charlie, who had accompanied him in the back seat and who had frisked him at Soffington's, did not remove the handcuffs.

"He's wearing something under his clothes," he told the booking officer. "Some kind of harness. Here, look at this." He loosened Fragger's shirt and revealed the metal belly plate.

"Well, he'll have to take it off and check it with his other stuff before we—"

"Hey, you can't do that," Fragger said, reacting suddenly.

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"That's my medical belt . . . for my condition."

"What condition?"

"My . . . I've got heart trouble. It's a magnetic pacer, and—"

"It could be a bomb," Charlie said.

Sweat started to pop out of Fragger's pores. What the hell was the matter with everybody in this time line? Now they were going to make a big fat production out of his transfer assembly. If they unsnapped the plate, my God, he could be stranded here in—

"So get him out of here," the desk man said. "Buhldorf from the sheriff's tick-tock squad is with the chief now. I'll have him meet you in the basement."

All the way down two flights of stairs into a sub-basement Fragger struggled to keep his cool. As they reached the bottom he heard the slap of descending shoe leather on the flight above. The bomb squad was wasting no time.

"Whatta we got?" the newcomer asked as he barged in.

As Charlie showed Buhldorf the plate, Fragger protested. "Will you guys come off it? You can see it's no bomb. Do I look like a terrorist or something? It's just what I said it was—a magnetic heart pacer. It's for my—"

"Electronic," Buhldorf said, peering at the plate. "No timer. Must be something new. Let's get it off him."

"Will you listen to me! It goes over my shoulders. I'll have to take my coat and shirt off. If you get me out of these cuffs then I can—"

"Probably putty inside," the bomb man said as he pulled a pair of wire cutters from his belt. "I think we can just snip these wires and—"

The titanium wires were hollow. They contained fluid. Once cut, the circuits could only be reconstituted in Endore's laboratory. But there was no such laboratory in this world! A scene from Nam flashed into Fragger's mind. He had played dead for seven hours in a ditch just twenty feet from a party of bivouacked Viet Cong after a sortie in which sixteen of his outfit had got it. When the time came to move at last, his muscles refused to function. But what you have to do, you have to do.

As Buhldorf raised the wire cutters, Fragger pressed his chin into his chest, held his breath, contorted his face, and then, through naked teeth, he let out a strangled cry of pain and crumpled to the floor, face down. Breathing rapidly and desperately then, he managed to gasp, "My chest . . . I told you . . ."

Charlie had tried to catch him. "He's having a heart attack!"

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Buhldorf stood there with the wire cutters. "I wonder if that thing could be one of those new PLO Pancakes that I heard about."

"For God's sake," Charlie shouted, "will you shut up and get a paramedic down here?"

The bomb expert shook his head as he started for the stairs. "In the old days they just stuck dynamite in their belt."

Fragger was hyperventilating now. The room was getting fuzzy and his hands and feet were beginning to tingle on their way to numbness. How far could he go before he passed out? The cop, as concerned as he was, gave no indication he was going to unlock the handcuffs as long as he remained alone with the prisoner. But he did loosen Fragger's tie and belt, and turn him over on his side. Fragger continued to pull huge drafts of air into his lungs. His feet were numb and he was beginning to lose track of time.

Had he blacked out? He wasn't sure. But somebody else was with them now.

"I'll give him a shot of morphine," a voice said, "and some C-O-two. Take the cuffs off."

Charlie was freeing his arms at last, and they turned him over on his back.

But, now that his ruse had succeeded, Fragger's hands were asleep and his brain was foggy. He scarcely felt the needle in his forearm, but the calming warmth of the morphine slid through his veins and his breathing slowed. How big a shot had they given him? Would it knock him out before sensation returned to his hands? He tried moving his fingers. Something was being held to his nostrils. That must be the carbon dioxide. His fingers moved. But the morphine was putting him under. It was now or never.

He raised his left arm and let it sort of flop onto his chest as a diverting move. Then as swiftly and cleanly as he could, his right hand shot toward the plate, flipped the safety catch and pressed the trip.

"Brrrack!" A cracking sound, the smell of ozone, and three stupefied policemen were left behind in a Beverly Hills basement where a legend had suddenly been born—a legend which would be discussed and written about for generations.

§ § §

Back on Olive Street, Murdo helped the collapsed Fragger to the couch, where he slept off the morphine. The next morning he told Murdo the whole story, and together they checked the log. Its

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message was plain. At no time had he been in any time continuum more than once. There had to be some other explanation.

"Tell me something about this jewelry store," he said to Murdo. "How did you happen to zero in on it in the first place?"

"Well, I made some jumps, you know—before you came along."

"Don't tell me Endore was after pearls, too."

"No, no. Not that. He wanted newspapers, magazines, scientific journals, and those big almanacs that come out every year—for information and stuff."

"So what about Soffington's?"

"Well, I was having this fight with Irene about Trusio and his goddam pearls, and while I was downtown on one of those trips I was eating lunch and reading the newspapers when I saw this item about the Moon of Benares arriving in Beverly Hills. Soffington's had bought it at a Sotheby's auction in London. It showed a picture of the pearl and I got hot flashes. If I could just give Irene a pearl like that I could hear her saying, 'Trusio who?' So I had to see it. I took a bus to Beverly Hills, and told the guy I was there to examine the pearl for my boss, a Kuwait oil sheik visiting L.A. He called the manager and they took me into his office. They opened the vault and brought out the Moon in a plush case. By this time I knew what I was going to do. The minute I had my hands on the case I'd hit the button and be long gone."

"And that's when you had the flap with Endore?"

"Well, I had the case in my hand when I stepped off the plate, and there was nothing for him, and I was late to boot, so I had to make up a story—which he didn't buy—and one thing led to another and before you know it he had a handle on the whole business. He raised hell, and started to call the cops. Can you imagine getting busted for lifting something from a store that doesn't even exist? Go ahead, look it up. There is no Soffington's in Beverly Hills."

"OK, OK, go on."

"Well, I didn't hit him hard. Just knocked him out, is all. He was dialing when I caught him on the head with that glass ashtray. I didn't stop to think. I just dragged him onto the plate and went and threw the switch. The funny thing about it is I didn't change the setting, so he's over there now in the same time line where I got the Moon!"

"Yeah, funny, funny," Fragger said. "But you took time to lift his wallet."

"What the hell, he owed me dough. Anyway, by that time I de-

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cided one pearl wasn't enough for Irene. I needed help so I called a guy named Keegan I used to know, and he told me about you."

"Keegan? King Kong Keegan?"

"That's him. And you can scream innocent if you want to, but Keegan saw that fragging in Nam."

"Yeah, Well, that only proves he's got a lip that needs stitching." Suddenly Fragger's fingers bit into Murdo's shoulder and his voice turned hard. "But you better get something straight, buddy. Killing to me is like having a tooth pulled. I don't do it for kicks. But if it's got to be done I don't back off, either."

"All right, all right. You don't have to get hot about it." As Fragger released him, Murdo rubbed his shoulder and added petulantly, "Can't we get on with the work?"

Murdo's story answered some questions, but the prospect of facing Bellini again, even in another time line, gave Fragger the chills.

"You've got enough pearls," he told Murdo. "Settle for twenty, and we'll go on to something else."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"A string of pearls has to be a proper length. Seventeen inches. Right now I have about fifteen inches. But actually for Irene I decided on twenty-one inches."

"Listen, Murdo, there's something going on out there in that no-man's-land I don't like. Let's knock it off."

"All right. Three more will make seventeen inches. I'll settle for that. Today and tomorrow should do it."

"OK," Fragger agreed. "But no jump this morning. I'm not unwound yet."

§ § §

On the way to the bus stop that afternoon he thought again of Bellini. Bellini existed in three or four time lines, maybe more. Did that mean everybody was spread around like that? With excitement he realized it could apply to him, too. The idea was a turn-on. To hell with the 2:14. He'd take a later bus. There was a lot to think about. He turned into a Hill Street cafeteria and ordered coffee.

Fragger's first reaction was one of wonder—and then curiosity. If his double did exist here, what was he like? Would they look exactly the same, talk the same, think the same? Suppose they met face to face? If only Endore were still around. He'd be the guy to know the answers. What had Murdo said? There were verge

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points in time. Did that mean that before, say, a certain verge point, that he and his double were the same man—or boy? It boggled the mind.

OK, suppose here and now he wanted to find this double. How would he go about it? Telephone book? Hell, Fragger had never been in the telephone directory in his life. His double wouldn't be either. Whoa, he thought, there was no law said he wouldn't. That was another turn-on. His double could have made it big! There were lots of ways. Fragger had come close himself, several times.

He gulped down the rest of the coffee and made for a telephone booth. There was a full column of Larsens in the book, but no Gerald. But it was only a Central Directory and, as everybody knows, Los Angeles is on a par with New York—it takes five fat phone books to cover the territory. He knew of a place on Fourth Street that had all the books—if it was still there. It was, but the two Gerald Larsens he found had the wrong initial. In the final volume, however, the Northeastern, he found something else. Running his fingernail down the Larsens, a name jumped out at him. Freda K., with an address in El Monte. His mother!

Of course. Why hadn't he thought of her? He winced. Why hadn't he thought of her any other time, like Mother's Day, or Christmas, for instance? Well, there was no help for it. If his double were no better than he, his mother now had two sons in the same line whose whereabouts she didn't know. He called her, disguising his voice. Of course she knew where Gerald was, she said. He was working in a gas station in Santa Monica. Fragger thanked her, saying he was an old army buddy, trying to locate him.

Gas station! Big deal.

Fragger's trip to Beverly Hills was a washout, too, although nothing threatening occurred. It was merely that the jewelers had never heard of the Moon of Benares.

The following day Fragger called his mother twice in two different time lines, and connected with one pearl. His double's whereabouts, in one case, was unknown; in the other he was working for the race track at Del Mar. Del Mar? Better than a Santa Monica gas station. Unless his job was shoveling.

On each jump after that, Fragger made a similar call, but the information continued to be disappointing. And since the transitron was operating at some distance from that ill-fated police station continuum, the incidence of finding Moons was more infrequent.

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Three days had passed and Murdo still needed one pearl to complete Irene's necklace. On the next jump Fragger called his mother from a booth on Fourth Street, as he had done before, and a child's voice answered the phone. A girl. For a second he thought he had dialed a wrong number. He asked for Mrs. Larsen.

"Grammaw isn't here now," the girl said. "Are you the man about the roof?"

Fragger hadn't kept close touch, but this must be his sister's kid, Mary Sue, who would be about ten now. "No, I'm a friend of your Uncle Jerry's," he said. "Do you know where I can find him?"

"He doesn't live here, he lives at Laguna Beach. Are you a friend of Powder's, too?"

"Powder?"

"Sure, Powder. Don't you watch TV? Powder and the Gory. They're going steady. It was in the paper."

"Oh," he said, sounding impressed. Why not? He *was* impressed. "Do you know where he lives in Laguna?"

"I think Grammaw has it in her address book. I'll look." In a few minutes the girl gave him a number on Spyglass Road. He thanked her and hung up. Jackpot!

At the bus stop he stood beside a teenager wearing a T-shirt with the inscription: DON'T BUST ME, OFFICER—IT'S UNDER ONE OZ. Fragger pumped him about Powder and the Gory. It was a comedy series about the uppers and downers of a rock band. Rock band! He could picture Powder with wild hair and fire-siren voice. Oh, well. Her real name, he learned, was Bonnie Bristol.

Just to play safe and keep this time line clean, he skipped Beverly Hills, and on his return he made certain the correct adjustment was entered in the log. The next morning his Soffington's trip was successful, and at long last Murdo was ready to get Irene's beads together. The artisan who'd be confronted with that job, Fragger couldn't help thinking, would face a coronary.

"I want a vacation for a couple days," Fragger said, "and I want to take it in the line I hit yesterday."

"What's the idea?"

"I'd like to run something down, that's all. It might turn into a good thing."

"OK," Murdo said, "why not?"

Fragger made the jump the next morning, but for once he left his necktie and the banker's suit behind. In jeans and a T-shirt he boarded a Greyhound for the beach resort fifty miles to the south.

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Laguna is an art colony, he soon learned, and the apartment where his alter ego lived was called the Utrillo. Spyglass Road followed the shoreline for a short distance between Laguna Beach and South Laguna, along a low bluff that overlooked a stretch of private beach. The Utrillo comprised five three-story apartments, built on the face of the bluff, with the top floor at street level. Gerald Larsen's number was the northernmost of the five. However, like other exclusive areas, what with buildings, fences and locked gates barring the way for the unwashed, there was no way to get down to the beach from that direction. The street curved here, and apparently a small indentation in the shoreline lay below, hardly big enough to be called a bay. Farther along, between two homes, Fragger could see what appeared to be a low outcropping of rocks about two hundred feet out in the water. It was a feature worth investigating, since if he expected to learn anything he'd have to approach from the ocean side.

He hiked back to Laguna, bought some swim trunks, undressed in a public bathhouse, stowed his clothes in a locker, and trudged southward along the beach. The shoulder elements of his field assembly were tucked into his trunks around the waist. The surf was moderate and he made his way through it and was soon swimming parallel with the slow rollers. Ten minutes later he pulled himself up on the seaward side of the outcropping and took a breather.

Then, easing upward until he could peer over the rocks, he surveyed the playboy's private beach. A long-legged bronzed girl with startling blonde hair was stretched out on a giant towel. Beside her on a beach chair was a man. Behind them on a table sheltered by a gaily colored umbrella were glasses and a container that Fragger assumed contained iced drinks. The man's face was partially turned away, but even at that distance, Fragger was pretty certain of two things—the girl was a dish, and the man was a living double of himself.

There were things to be done now. For one thing, he needed more tan to match the skin of his counterpart. The three weeks he had spent with the phony Endore had resulted in his losing some of the color he had picked up horsing around with that bunch in Santa Monica. Three days should do it. He moved into a motel north of town and began a crash program of soaking up California sun. He ate junk food and avoided plush-looking places where the other Larsen might be recognized.

By observing from a distance, Fragger learned his counterpart

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spent about three hours on the sand daily, leaving about 4:00 in the afternoon. During that period he usually made two or three swims out to the rocks, from which he dove to return to the beach. It formed a pattern of action, and, if you have an enemy, such a pattern can doom you.

But Fragger was not quite ready. He had to give some thought to Murdo. He could return to Olive Street and, by force, dispatch the pearl hustler into another time line. That would prevent Murdo from ever tracking him or having him tracked over here. But why bother? If this Laguna plan succeeded, the body of the other Larsen would return in his place, and Murdo, thinking it was the original, would merely reset the machine and dump the body as he had dumped Endore, then look for a new helper.

But there was one flaw. Suppose Murdo didn't reset the machine? Suppose he just checked the body, removed the field assembly, and brrrack! pumped him right back here where he came from? That, of course, would be in a deserted Los Angeles basement, but eventually the body would be found and identified as that of Gerald Larsen, formerly of the U.S. Army. How long would it take for an investigation to reach Laguna? Damn. There was no help for it. He'd have to go back.

He went to bed early and catnapped till 2:30 A.M. He dressed then, gulped some black coffee at an all night sandwich shop, and was back on Bunker Hill by 3:00 A.M. He flipped on the light and stole quietly to Murdo's bedroom. Bending over the curled up sleeping Levantine, he gave him a karate cut under the ear, grabbed him by the wrists and dragged him all the way to the plate in the lab. Then, turning one of the dials a hair, he threw the switch. That took care of Murdo.

After carefully resetting the dial, he began to study his problem. The switch that activated the jump was on the control panel, a good twelve feet from the dispatch plate. It was a common vertical U-type with handle below. To close the circuit, the handle had to be pushed down and in until the arms of the "U" meshed in the terminals. Its action, however, was new and stiff, and Fragger realized it would take some force to do the trick.

In a kitchen drawer he found a ball of twine, and in a tool box some nails and a hammer. He pushed a wooden packing case over to the control panel. Then, standing on it, he drove two nails into adjoining beams in the ceiling directly over the switch, and tied the end of the twine to one of them. Unrolling the cord until a loop had dropped to the level of the switch, he held the roll at the

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other nail until he had gauged the length he wanted, cut the twine, and fastened the other end to the second nail. Going then to Endore's bookcase, he selected one of the heaviest volumes he could find, opened it approximately in the middle and hung it, binding uppermost, on the line formed by the suspended loop. Then, pulling the book outward and upward until it was two feet from the open switch, he released it. It swung in against the handle with more than enough impact to drive it into closed position. So far, so good.

Fragger next went to Murdo's clothes closet and got a wire coat hanger. For sheer adaptability this gadget has to be among the ten greatest inventions of the human mind. How many locked automobiles had he opened with a corrupted coat hanger? It could be bent into a thousand shapes for a thousand uses. A mickey-mouser's dream tool.

But Fragger used the hanger just as it was. He stood sideways at the control panel and again pulled out the book to its elevated position. Holding it with his left hand, he let about an inch of the book rest on the bottom of the hanger—with the hook uppermost. Then, with the hanger at right angles to the book, he sighted along its edge to another point in the ceiling considerably farther away. Moving the packing case under the new spot, he mounted it, drove in another nail and fastened the twine as before. Letting the ball unroll as he climbed down, he again positioned the book and hanger, and cut the cord to the proper length, which he knotted to the hook part of the hanger. Finally, he tied the remaining cord to the middle of the bottom of the coat hanger, on which the book would rest, and let what was left of the ball drop to the floor. Then he again put all elements in place, and the contrivance hung there in the air like a baited mousetrap. He picked up the dangling piece of cord and jerked it in the direction away from the control panel. The hanger was pulled out from under the book and the latter slammed down against the switch. It worked.

Only one thing was left to be done. Again he moved the wooden box, this time to a spot about five feet out from the panel, where he drove another nail at an angle into the top of the case itself. Taking the dangling cord, he strung it around the nail and over to the dispatch plate. The ball dwindled to nothing but he ended up with almost two feet to spare.

Setting the whole thing up once again, and standing this time near the plate, he yanked the cord. Fragger had never heard of

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Rube Goldberg, the original mickey-mouser; but Rube, if he had seen the action, would have loved it.

It was 4:00 A.M. There'd be no bus for three hours or more. Fragger decided to grab some more sack time right there. Four hours later, refreshed, he stepped on the plate and made his last jump.

§ § §

He needed one more thing—a weapon. And, just in case things got loused up somehow, it might be safer if the weapon were not bought in Laguna. He stopped in a Fifth Street pawn shop and picked up a thin-bladed jackknife. He was ready. The bus dropped him in Laguna Beach at 11:45. He checked out of his motel, knocked off two quarter-pounders and a malt at McDonald's, and returned to the beach. With the knife taped to his belly below the transfer element, he made his way as before to the rock outcropping in the bay. It was now about 1:15, and no one was yet in sight on the Larsen strip of sand. Fifteen minutes passed, and Fragger was beginning to curse his luck. This would be the day the bastard decided not to show.

But he was wrong. A couple emerged from the house, and the girl flopped onto a beach towel. A few words were exchanged and the playboy trotted into the water and began to swim with easy overhand strokes. Fragger's head swiveled in both directions, surveying the bay. No observer seemed close enough or interested enough to pose a threat, so he reached down and disengaged the knife. As the swimmer reached the rock and pulled himself from the water, Fragger submerged and moved around to the side in readiness. When the man dove, Fragger shoved off simultaneously and came up beneath him, the blade a deadly shimmering streak.

The man struggled momentarily as his lifeblood and bubbles flared out from a wicked slice in his chest. A spent breaker rolled over them, and no other swimmer was near. Fragger felt the attack had been unobserved. Taking a deep breath, he towed the body around the rocks. Then a horrible discovery struck him like a concrete fist.

The dead man wore a small pencil-thin mustache!

§ § §

Fragger's castle began to crash around him. It was one of those uncomputable trifles that turn the course of history. A man just doesn't leave the beach for a swim in the surf and return dripping a few minutes later minus his mustache. His brain numb, Fragger raised his head and gazed out across the Pacific.

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Far away, a tramp steamer was a smudge along the horizon. Several fishing boats moved slowly with the breeze, and a cabin cruiser was plowing its way northward toward Balboa. Closer in, toward the public beach, he could see the heads of swimmers bobbing in the surf. The knife was cold in his hand.

He moved suddenly then. Stripping off the other's trunks and then his own, together with his transfer assembly, he made the switch of outfits. He checked the wires and plates, took one more look around, and pressed the trip. The seawater made a slapping sound as it rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the disappearing body. In a few seconds the last trace of blood was dissipated. Fragger submerged and raised the knife to his mouth. Steeling himself, he drew the point across his upper lip. Then, defiantly raising his arm skyward, he tossed the blade out toward the sea and began swimming toward the beach.

As he emerged from the surf, his hand concealing the cut, blood began fanning out across his wet chin.

The girl was on one elbow eyeing his approach, but she didn't seem to be reacting. What the hell, Fragger thought, she must be one of those blind-as-as-bat babes who refuse to wear glasses. At least that was a break.

Then it registered, and she leaped to her feet. "Jerry! What happened to you? What's that—?"

"Nothing," he mumbled as he trotted for the bathhouse. "Diving. Gashed it on a rock."

She was coming toward him. "Let me see."

"Not now. I'll be back in a minute."

At the moment he had to get into a robe to conceal any minor skin or body difference the girl might notice, and reach a bathroom where he could apply a bandage to the cut and go through the pretense of shaving off his mustache. As the blonde stared after him, Fragger stiffarmed the bathhouse door and found a robe. Wrapped in that he made for the entrance to the house proper.

Inside to his left a doorway opened into a game room and bar. To the right of the stairs were two doors, one of them ajar revealing a bathroom. In the medicine cabinet he found Bandaids and applied one to his lip. Then he took the stairs two at a time. On the second floor there were three bedrooms, each apparently with its own bath. Fragger entered the master bedroom and slid open the doors of a walk-in wardrobe.

All his life, clothes had been no big deal to him. Why, he asked

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as he stared at this sudden array of attire, had it been so important to his Laguna double? Maybe the taste comes easy—if you have the money to afford it.

He selected a blackish brown sport shirt, doubleknit slacks with a brown and beige check, a light beige jacket, and a pair of natural leather loafers. No white man in Southern California under sixty wears a hat. From a cabinet he withdrew fresh underwear and rust-colored socks. A quick shower then and he got into the clothes. Within a few minutes he was critically examining the result in a full length wing mirror. Right side. Left side. Rear. "By God," he said, "I've done it." He started to grin, then discovered it hurt.

He looked at his hands. His fingerprints were there to put the lie on any charge of impersonation. In fact, at some time in the past he had actually *been* this Gerald Larsen. If his recent memory was flawed he could blame the diving accident. The body he disposed of was irrevocably gone, millions of time lines away. The pad was his now—and all that went with it. That included . . . what was her name? Bonnie . . . Bonnie Bristol. How could such a dish be playing a character in a rock band? Man, if King Kong Keegan and other guys in the old outfit could see him now.

He took off the jacket, draped it over a chair, and retraced his way to the beach where Bonnie was waiting.

"Oh, you're dressed," she said. "How's your face? It looks frightful with that bandage."

"It's OK. But I had enough for one day. Let's go in the bar."

Deep inside Fragger was a certain impatience to plunge into this new life, tasting its goodies, but he was not stupid. Slow and easy, he told himself. There was time, lots of it. Besides, he realized his swollen lip was throbbing. Maybe it did need stitches. He let Bonnie do the talking.

For dinner they telephoned for a pizza, Bonnie tossed a green salad, and Fragger located a six-pack of frosty Coors in the bar. That's the brand of beer that easterners smuggle home after they visit the West. The couple ate on the terrace overlooking the beach. By this time Fragger was lulled into imagining he had the rhythm of the imposture, and his small talk was more relaxed. But somewhere it didn't have the proper ring. Bonnie cocked her head and stared at him intently.

"Are you strung out on something?"

"What do you mean?"

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"You said funny things. You know, like driving up to L.A. next week. You've got to be in court in San Diego next week."

"Did I say that? So I didn't mean next week. I meant the weekend." Fragger put his fingers to his scalp. "My head feels rocky. Must've shook me up at that."

"You want me to drive you to a doctor?"

"It'll wait. Let's go in."

At the door of his bedroom, Bonnie pressed his hand. "What you need is rest. I'll be back to tuck you in." She turned away and glided down the hall.

Fragger watched her go, his pulse rate up ten. What was their sex life, he wondered. As he located pajamas and got into them, he knew only that he'd stay cool, follow her lead and play it by ear. He was brushing his teeth when she came in, her loose wheat-colored hair tumbling down around the shoulders of her turquoise and black dressing gown. Fragger rinsed and replaced the brush. Coming out almost gingerly, he put his hands lightly on her hips. As he touched her he had the strange feeling that all his past suddenly had been whisked away, the curtain was rising on a second act, and all the fresh promises of a new life were there just across the threshold.

"You know," he said. "I feel just like I've been born again." It was a line he'd read somewhere.

"Short life," a third voice said quietly.

Fragger's head jerked up. A man had entered the room silently and was standing ten feet away with a leveled .38.

"You!" Fragger gasped. He was staring at the face of the man he had just killed.

"Who else?"

Bonnie pushed herself free and looked in astonishment from one to the other and back again. "Jerry," she said, "what is this? Who—?"

"I'm Jerry," said the man with the gun.

"But—"

"Would you step out in the hall, please?" the intruder said. "We have some business in here."

"Wait a minute," Fragger broke in, "you can't—"

"Shut up," the other said. "Cut out, honey," he commanded the girl. She sidled toward the door and as it closed behind her, the man regarded Fragger with bleak humor. "This I call real cake. You were beautiful out there today. Beautiful."

"But . . . then you're not—"

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"Of course not. I just watched with binoculars. You know, you thought you could walk in here and just take over the setup. But you forgot something."

"Put the gun down," Fragger said. "Let's talk. I'll make some drinks."

"Don't move! I'll make my own drinks later. I notice you didn't talk with the other guy. You did what you had to do. We're all alike."

"What did I forget?"

"You forgot to think this out. Tell me about your jumps. They were all long ones, weren't they?"

"In the 22/18,000,000 range," Fragger said. "One bummer in the 23. Why?"

"No short hops in the zero, say, ten thousand range?"

"No, why?"

"Don't you know why?"

"What the hell is this, traffic court?"

"I'll tell you why. Because in each of those low-number time lines there was an Endore and his transitron pumping out Murdos and Larsens by the millions, and after that pearl business got started, the 22/18,000,000 range was lousy with them. That was the mother lode, man. Didn't you run into *anybody*?"

"I'll be damned! That's how I got trapped at Soffington's. One of them must have ripped off the Moon right ahead of me!"

"Happens every day—somewhere."

"OK," Fragger said, "give me your harness and I'll go back to your time line and hunt something else."

"I can't do that. Have you figured the odds against one of us making it like this guy did? A billion to one? Maybe he's the *only* one that did. And how many of us are looking for him? Thousands? Millions? It was just dumb luck that you and I stumbled in here. But if I let you go back, you're gonna get tired looking, and then what's to stop you from changing your mind and coming through this door like I did? . . . I said it before—we're all alike. We went through Nam with a red hot gun. For some guys it comes natural. They even called us Fragger. You know why."

"I'll give you my word."

"No, this is the way it has to be. Nothing personal, you understand."

His finger tightened on the trigger. Fragger, in sudden hysteria, flung out his arm as if to ward off the bullet.

"No!" he screamed. "Wait—"

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The slug ripped into his chest. A belching sound came from his open mouth, his knees buckled and, with eyes wide open, he began to crumple. The last image to register on his retinas was of his duplicate standing there with silent gun. And . . . or was it a trick of his fading vision . . .

Behind his slayer, in the now open doorway, stood a third man, menacingly identical to both of them. . . .

A SECOND SOLUTION TO NEPTUNE'S GREAT RING

(from page 53)

The lieutenant reasoned: "I trust the captain when he says the ring's area is a constant, given the length of the chord. If that's true, it makes no difference how large or small the inner circle is. Let's reduce it to the minimum—a point of zero radius. The chord is then the diameter of the outer circle and the 'ring' is the circle itself. Therefore its area is pi times the square of its radius."

"So," continued the lieutenant, "all I had to do was multiply pi by 10,000,000,000. That was easy because it just meant shifting the decimal point of pi ten places to the right."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the captain. "But how in the name of Asimov can you remember pi to fourteen decimal places?"

Lieutenant Flarp handed the captain a crimson martini, then elevated his own glass. "How I want a drink!" he said. "Alcoholic of course, after the heavy chapters involving quantum mechanics."

Third question: How did Flarp remember pi to 14 decimal places? See page 159.

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ONE REJECTION TOO MANY
by Patricia Nurse

Mrs. Nurse was born Patricia Plant in a suburb of London, England, and emigrated to Canada 1955, where she promptly snagged a Canadian husband. In due course they produced a delightful son, who is studying engineering at the University of Western Ontario. She blames a stray copy of Writer's Digest *for reviving her interest in writing. This story is her first sale.*

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Imagine my delight when I spotted your new science fiction magazine on the news-stands. I have been a fan of yours for many, many years and I naturally wasted no time in buying a copy. I wish you every success in this new venture.

In your second issue I read with interest your plea for stories from new authors. While no writer myself, I have had a time traveller living with me for the past two weeks (he materialized in the bathtub without clothes or money, so I felt obliged to offer him shelter), and he has written a story of life on earth as it will be in the year 5000.

Before he leaves this time frame, it would give him great pleasure to see his story in print—I hope you will feel able to make this wish come true.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your kind letter and good wishes.

It is always refreshing to hear from a new author. You have included some most imaginative material in your story; however, it is a little short on plot and human interest—perhaps you could

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rewrite it with this thought in mind.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was sorry that you were unable to print the story I sent you. Vahl (the time traveller who wrote it) was quite hurt as he tells me he is an author of some note in his own time. He has, however, rewritten the story and this time has included plenty of plot and some rather interesting mating rituals which he has borrowed from the year 3000. In his own time (the year 5015) sex is no longer practised, so you can see that it is perfectly respectable having him in my house. I do wish, though, that he could adapt himself to our custom of wearing clothes—my neighbours are starting to talk!

Anything that you can do to expedite the publishing of Vahl's story would be most appreciated, so that he will feel free to return to his own time.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

Thank you for your rewritten short story.

I don't want to discourage you but I'm afraid you followed my suggestions with a little too much enthusiasm—however, I can understand that having an imaginary nude visitor from another time is a rather heady experience. I'm afraid that your story now rather resembles a far-future episode of Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman or Soap.

Could you tone it down a bit and omit the more bizarre sex rituals of the year 3000—we must remember that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* is intended to be a family publication.

Perhaps a little humor would improve the tale too.

Yours sincerely,

Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

Vahl was extremely offended by your second rejection—he said he has never received a rejection slip before, and your referring to him as "imaginary" didn't help matters at all. I'm afraid he rather lost his temper and stormed out into the garden—it was at this unfortunate moment that the vicar happened to pass by.

Anyway, I managed to get Vahl calmed down and he has rewritten the story and added plenty of humor. I'm afraid my subsequent meeting with the vicar was not blessed with such success! I'm quite sure Vahl would not understand another rejection.

Yours truly,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I really admire your persistence in rewriting your story yet another time. Please don't give up hope—you can become a fairly competent writer in time, I feel sure.

I'm afraid the humor you added was not the kind of thing I had in mind at all—you're not collaborating with Henny Youngman by any chance are you? I really had a more sophisticated type of humor in mind.

Yours truly,

Isaac Asimov

P.S. Have you considered reading your story, as it is, on The Gong Show?

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It really was very distressing to receive the return of my manuscript once again—Vahl was quite speechless with anger.

It was only with the greatest difficulty that I prevailed upon him to refine the humor you found so distasteful, and I am submitting his latest rewrite herewith.

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In his disappointment, Vahl has decided to return to his own time right away. I shall be sorry to see him leave as I was getting very fond of him—a pity he wasn't from the year 3000 though. Still, he wouldn't have made a very satisfactory husband; I'd have never known where (or when) he was. It rather looks as though my plans to marry the vicar have suffered a severe setback too. Are you married, Dr. Asimov?

I must close this letter now as I have to say goodbye to Vahl. He says he has just finished making some long overdue improvements to our time frame as a parting gift—isn't that kind of him?

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Morrison (Miss)

Dear Miss Morrison:

I am very confused by your letter. Who is Isaac Asimov? I have checked with several publishers and none of them has heard of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* although the address on the envelope was correct for *this* magazine.

However, I was very impressed with your story and will be pleased to accept it for our next issue. Seldom do we receive a story combining such virtues as a well-conceived plot, plenty of human interest, and a delightfully subtle brand of humor.

Yours truly,

George H. Scithers,
Editor,
Arthur C. Clarke's Science Fiction Magazine

A THIRD SOLUTION TO NEPTUNE'S GREAT RING
(from page 155)

Lieutenant Flarp's last statement, "How I want a drink . . . ," is a mnemonic for pi devised by the famous British astronomer Sir James Jeans. The number of letters in each word corresponds to the first 15 digits of pi.

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THE SUICIDE OF MAN

by John Brunner

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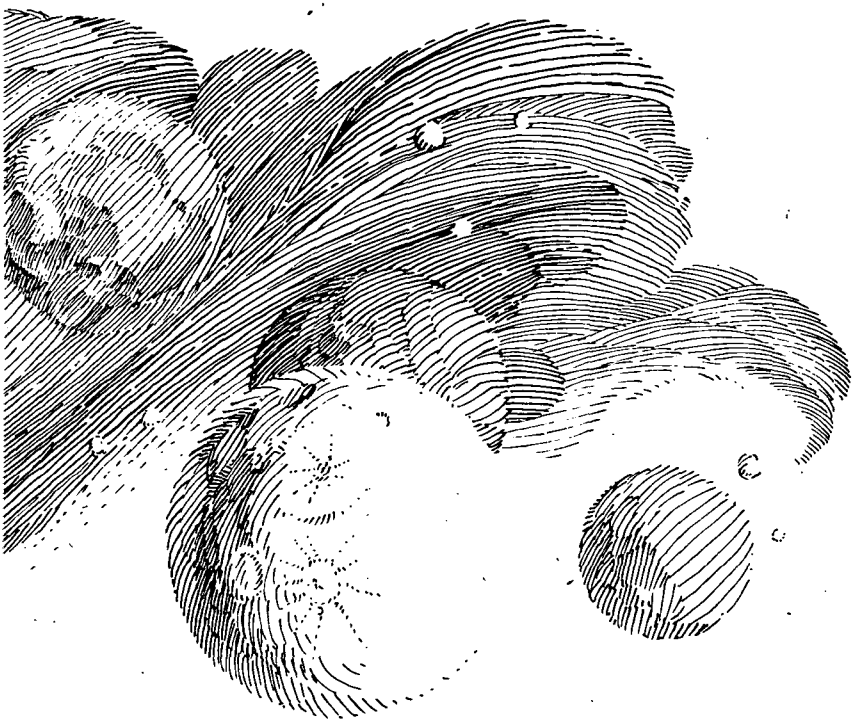

The author was born in Oxfordshire, England, in 1934; he now lives in Somerset and tells us that his residence, "Square House," isn't, because of additions. Of his books, our favorites are The Traveler in Black *and* Stand on Zanzibar. *He's currently working on a novel which tells how the race between the steamboats* Robert E. Lee *and* Natchez *really* should *have come out.*

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This is a story with a happy ending. The beginning, on the other hand. . . .

Well, after all his care, all his precautions, there was absolutely no way he could not be dead.

And yet he wasn't. There were presence, consciousness, alarm, associated emotions. That which had been "I" for him was undestroyed.

He contrived an utterance, half a scream and half a desperate question. They answered, somehow.

What they told him was: "You are a ghost."

It was a place, no doubt about that. In fact it was a recognisable room, with a solid floor and solid walls and a solid ceiling that shed gentle light and even a piece of furniture which supported him in a relaxed posture. Also he was not alone. There were three with him, of whom one was definitely a man and two were indisputably women. But he was more concerned about himself. He looked down and discovered his familiar naked skin with scars from, at last count, eight unsuccessful operations. He identified the hands he had once been so proud of because they were deft and subtle. He knew his own limbs, his very body-hairs. . . .

And was dazed and horrified and ultimately appalled.

Someone said, and he believed it was the woman who stood nearer of the two, "In your vocabulary we find no better referent for a person who is neither alive nor dead. You were Lodovico Zaras. You were a professor of experimental psychology. You fell victim to a form of cancer which disseminated rapidly. You decided in a year which you called by the figures one-nine-seven-eight that you would rather cease than continue to endure operations which could at best postpone your death but never cure the sickness. Is this what you recall?"

He replied, not quite understanding how he was able to speak at all, let alone do so in response to statements he knew not to be in English or Spanish or French or any other tongue he was acquainted with, "Yes, but how can I remember anything? I killed myself!"

Again the flat assertion: "You are a ghost."

At the moment of his death he had been sitting in a favourite chair, with the glass from which he had drunk his remedy for existence on a table at his side, a favourite recording of Bach's organ music ringing in his ears.

He was sitting (again?) now, on what was not except by remote

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derivation a commonplace chair. He could and did stand up, feeling no twinge of pain, none of that old stubborn heaviness in the limbs which cancer had weighed down. He felt ethereally light. Yet he did not perceive himself as immaterial; when he clapped his palms together there was a noise and the contact stung, and stare how he might he could not see through his hands.

"Ghost?" he repeated in bewilderment.

From somewhere the man who was in the room produced an object he could name although its form was strange. It consisted of a reflector surrounded by a frame; it was a mirror.

"Look for yourself," the man invited, and he did, and he failed to find what he was looking for. What he saw was the mirror.

Empty of his image.

Because of that he grew extremely frightened, but there was something worse to follow.

"Touch me," said the woman who had spoken before, and came to stand in front of him. For a long moment he hesitated, so disturbed by not seeing his reflection that he needed to register every sense-datum he could. The ceiling was white and luminous. The walls wore the rich, profound blue of a distant horizon. The floor was green and reminded him of spring grass. This before him was, yes, was a woman: taller than himself, slender, with an avian fineness of bone, not beautiful but so unusual—indeed so improbable—that if he had hurried along a street where she was walking the other way he would have checked and looked back, astonished at her having not enough black hair beginning too high on her forehead, ceasing too high on her nape, amazed at those over-long legs which endowed a child-size torso with the height of an adult, disturbed above all by the implication that while being very surely human she was also something . . . other.

Moreover she was naked, as he was.

Or was she?

There was something. . . .

But it hurt his eyes, and he had to blink, and as his lids came down she repeated her command in a more urgent manner, holding up her thin right hand.

Diffident, he complied when the blink was over, and felt warm convincing flesh, perhaps a little sparse over the bones.

"I can touch you and I cannot see my own reflection," he said after a while. Giddying, the clash between the apparent reality of this alien woman and the plain incontestable nonreality of

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himself who could not make a mirror give back his portrait made him tremble and sway.

"But if I touch you. . . ." the woman said, and reached out, and with a quick sidelong gesture like an axe-blow demonstrated how she could pass her own hand through his. Or—no! Where his hand seemed to be. He felt nothing, except the phantom of a chill, yet he witnessed and would have sworn on his life to the reality of her action.

Gasping, and realising in the same moment that he could detect no rush of air into his lungs, he cried out, "I don't understand!" Still not knowing, either, how he could talk.

The man advanced, his face—which was too long, too skimpy, too much dominated by vast eyes—set in an expression of concern and regret.

"Lodovico Zaras, before we proceed with explanations, we must offer our deepest and most sincere apologies. It is to be hoped that a person such as yourself, a pioneer in your own day, an intellectual explorer as it were, may forgive the presumptuous interference we plead guilty to. I speak to you as what you were, not what you are, but I trust that the difference has not yet become unendurable. Inevitably the burden of that difference will grow greater as time passes, but we hope and predict that the series of shocks you are due for will be slow enough for you to make adjustments and ultimately grant us the forgiveness which we beg of you now. I am Horad. It is not a name as you would understand a name, but more of a title, which I think you would find meaningless. My companions, of whom the same ought to be said, can be addressed as Genua"—who had passed her hand through his—"and Orlalee."

Still in the grip of that impulse which had dictated his suicide, he nonetheless failed to prevent his mind from setting to work on the data offered. It had been his curse since childhood that he could not bear mental inactivity. The prospect of having to lie like a dummy for yet another year in a hospital bed, when he had hoped the latest operation might also be the last, had been what drove him to knock on the doors of death. There were drugs aplenty to cure pain; those which cured boredom were not recognised as part of the pharmacopoeia, and most were illegal.

He said at length to Horad, "If I try and touch you. . ."

"Do so!" Horad held up his right arm. It felt much like Genua's, slim to the point of being scrawny. But. . .

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There was something about these three which had already prevented him from thinking of them as merely naked, though none of them wore what he was accustomed to regarding as a garment.

In the case of Horad, it was far more striking than it was on Genua. It registered on his eyes as a zone where it was hard to focus; on his skin, as a vibration or a tingling; most, though, it impinged directly on his mind as a—a—

A state as much between *something* and *nothing* as he himself was between *alive* and *dead.*

On the women it might have passed for some form of protective garb; after all, who can predict what will happen in the vicinity of ghosts? But on Horad it could be—could be *detected* all around his head, across his shoulders, down his upper arms. . . . To look at him any other way except straight in those excessive eyes was to be gravely disturbed by . . . *it.*

Lodovico swallowed: nothing, not even his own saliva. Yet it was as though he did. He remembered what he had formerly experienced as the act of swallowing, and this was much like it, and had his attention not been on the act it might have passed as well as the real thing.

Faintly he said, "What have you made of me, that you think I ought to call myself a ghost?"

The three exchanged pleased looks. Orlalee spoke up for the first time.

"We hope to be able to answer that question first of all. We need, however, to know how you perceive us before we can choose the proper terms to express our intended meaning. How do we seem to you?" And they struck poses for inspection.

He looked them over in detail as best he could, still finding it impossible to study certain areas of—no, that was inexact: *around*—Horad. He found all three alike in their fragility and near-hairlessness; on their respective pubes there was only down, not actual hair. Their feet, as he looked lower, he found to be high-arched, with the toes reduced to simple stubs, the nails to thin pale lines.

He pondered the implications, disregarding one sick notion which had briefly occurred to him: that he might be in Hell. There was no torment in his mind at the moment other than the sense of need-to-know-unsatisfied which had always been an integral part of his personality. On the contrary! He was in a dream-like state of elation all of a sudden. In his mind, such total terror that it made him want to dissolve into eternal dark-

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ness balanced and teetered back and forth in competition with a sense of excitement he had not enjoyed since he was a boy, the excitement due to comprehending in the guts those abstract concepts which he knew his teachers were merely mouthing. He fancied for a moment he might do to these people what he had loved to do to his instructors, and surprise them. And abandoned the idea at once. On the other hand, conceivably he might please them.

Licking (or that was what it felt like) his lips (or what in this version of "I" now felt like lips), he said (or used whatever communication channel had been allotted him), "I think you must be people, but so much later than me that I don't suppose you can tell me what the date is."

For a very short time he was alone. The period elapsed was so brief by his standards, he might have dismissed it as an illusion but that on returning Horad said, "Excuse us, please. We were delighted by your response and wished to be-personal in conveying news of it."

The hyphenation of "be-personal" was audible (?) to Lodovico; this was a clearly identifiable proof that the language he was speaking (?) was none of his own time.

And in the same thought came awareness of the truth that he must no longer say "own"; he could, however, say "former."

Orlalee said, "We were particularly pleased that you have been able to express a significant truth. We are people, in part of the sense you would use the term. We are also much evolved past where you were. And if we were to try and give you a date, it might well be wrong by several thousand years."

"Revolutions of the planet," said Genua, "are not as important now as they were for you."

Lodovico experienced a biting-lower-lip sensation. He felt real to himself; these people were talking to him as though he were real; yet when they tried to touch him they could not do what he could, locate solid substance.

It was not simple, but it was also not impossible to resolve the conundrum.

"You must have a means," he said slowly, "of projecting an effigy, a counterpart, a simulacrum, of a personality for which you stumbled on sufficient data to make it seem real *to itself,* and yet which you can only half-perceive. Perhaps you are having to force yourselves to believe in me, while I have no trouble accept-

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ing that I am here and now although I wished never to exist again."

He clenched his fists.

"But being what you have made me, what am I—what can I do or be? Any world but mine must be illusion to me!"

"We could not ask permission in advance," said Orlalee, who was both fairer-haired and darker-skinned than Genua. It was impossible to determine whether she was either in respect of Horad owing to the vagueness he sort-of-wore. "This was because until we did it there was nothing of which permission might be obtained. Now there is. We will accordingly accept your instruction if you say: *desist*!"

They waited.

Eventually he said, looking past them at the blank blue walls, "First tell me what I can and cannot do. Do I—do I eat? Drink? Sleep, suffer, become intoxicated?"

Still they waited, until he forced out the last part of the multiplex question.

"I feel weak, only half-real. Have you resurrected me so that I must face death a second time?"

"You are a collective percept," Horad said. "As yet you are not strong because only we three perceive you. We hear you speak; it is not with sound. We see where you are, but it is not with light. We and you interact, but if we did not agree to perceive you there would be nothing."

"Yet I perceive myself!" Lodovico burst out. "I am aware!"

"That is because without your perception of yourself there would be nothing for us to perceive. We did not choose that this be so; it turned out to be of the nature of the universe."

He wrestled with that for a while and eventually gave a feeble shake of the head.

"We may have some difficulty here," Orlalee said. "We are uncertain of the parameters you ascribed to a definition of 'consciousness' in your age. We have faint echoes of certain theories, but no indication of which if any you subscribed to. Permit us to question you on this subject and by stages our explanations will become more lucid."

"Ask away," Lodovico invited, folding his arms on his chest.

"When you killed yourself," Genua said, taking a step closer to him, "did you expect to re-awaken in a paradise or a place of torment?"

"I didn't expect to wake at all," was his prompt and emphatic

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answer. "Since boyhood I'd been resigned to the fact that consciousness was a by-product of material existence. The fact that I seem to myself to be here, now, whenever and wherever the here-and-now may be, indicates that I must have been nearly right. You just told me that if I did not perceive myself you would have nothing to perceive, and moreover that I am a weak percept because no one apart from you three perceives me— Wait, I should re-phrase that. No one else *is perceiving* me."

"Could that"—from Horad—"have been expressed in the language of your time?"

"Yes!" the answer snapped back. "When I said it I wasn't aware of using a language I didn't grow up with."

Three smiles.

"Oh, we have chosen very well," Orlalee said. "Faced with the logical contradiction of being aware when he is-and-knows-he-must-be dead, he makes statements concerning not the self which cannot be present but the self which he's currently observing by being it. I judge that you, Lodovico, while surprised and startled at being imitated, are not angry."

"Angry?" He pondered, or imagined or suspected or believed or [a thousand possibilities] that he did. Eventually he said, "No, I don't think I have enough strength in the version of me which you three are perceiving to become angry. But in any case I would hope not to be. I would prefer to be fascinated by a unique chance, if it is unique, and even if it isn't I'd like to add something unforseen and almost unimaginable to the total of my experience. It must be very long after my own epoch.

"But you have survived. In my time, for a while at least, we were afraid mankind might not. It follows that you must have cured the problems which worried us. I find I'm fascinated by the idea of seeing a far-distant future civilisation, even though I may find many aspects of it incomprehensible. If I seem dull-witted, bear with me. Evolution must have taken place on the mental as well as the physical plane."

"Yes, that is true," Horad confirmed. "Still, the fact that we have been able to establish communication argues that there is continuity between humans of your age and of this. I have thought of a way of expressing how much time has elapsed since your original existence. We are approximately as distant from you as you were from the creatures who spoke in grunts, shaped animal-horns and branches into tools, but were still terrified of fire and ate their food uncooked. Yet there are few differences in

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form between you and me: somewhat less hair—for instance I judge you were capable of growing a beard although you did not do so, whereas I am not—and longer limbs and smaller torsos and marginally greater cranial capacity. We mature later, sexually speaking; we have lost the ability to metabolise certain essential compounds from their chemical precursors, or in other words we require two more vitamins than you did. And there are other petty differences. Nonetheless we are equipped to communicate with you, while you could not have conversed with your correspondingly remote ancestor."

"Because I'm not myself even though I imagine that I am. In fact I'm only your collective percept." The statement was hurtful to utter, but Lodovico felt obliged.

"True. Remember, though, you are as exact a percept as we, with millennia of knowledge and skill you're unaware of, have been able to contrive," said Genua. "In your day, if what data have endured may be relied on, reconstructions of extinct primitive organisms had been attempted by combining fossil relics with guidelines based on species still surviving that had changed little over aeons. Not much later, some of the great reptiles were actually bred again from modified cousins or descendants. You are the result of a corresponding technique applied to consciousness instead of physical shape."

"Why me?" Lodovico demanded.

"Chance brought us sufficient data to derive you. I regret to say"—this from Orlalee with a wry smile—"it is not because you became famous through the millennia!"

"No, I meant: why do it at all? Am I the first, or is this something you nowadays do routinely?"

"You are the very first," Harod said. "As for the underlying reason. . ." He shrugged; it was curious to see how that gesture had endured, and disturbing to see how differently the muscles moved on that bird-light body . . . and most disturbing of all *not* to see, because he couldn't bear to look, the matching movement of the whatever-it-wasn't that Horad "wore."

"So I am an experiment," said Lodovico.

"That is so."

"You plan to study me? Interrogate me?"

"Naturally."

"And"—with boldness that surprised him—"is there any bargain between us?"

"Yes, of course," Orlalee said. "Even before we commence study-

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ing you, we wish you to agree that the trouble you are being put to is justified. First, therefore, we must show you our world. If, after inspecting it, you decide you would prefer not to assist us, you may cease. Obviously we shall then make another attempt, but we shall be resigned to the same outcome—and so on and on, if necessary for many generations."

"It is unbefitting," said Genua, "to run counter to another's will."

"All by itself that promise makes me like your world," said Lodovico. "Show it to me."

Struck by a sudden thought, he added, "By the way, . . . is it still Earth?"

Visions of other solar systems blazed and faded in his mind in a fraction of a heartbeat.

"Yes," Horad said. "After all this time, it is still Earth."

But an Earth its inhabitants had learned to love, with all its ulcers healed. It still had mountains and oceans and rivers, valleys and forests and plains, blue sky and white clouds that sometimes darkened and uttered the ancient bark of thunder. Almost at once, however, he began to notice changes. There were trees he could not put a name to. Friendly fish of no species he recognised came ambling up beaches on stubby leg-*cum*-fin limbs, and often as he was passing a flowered vine it would reach out in his direction and breathe a gust of perfume over him, then fall back quivering as though with unheard private laughter.

Essentially, though, the planet remained as recognisable as its people, and in all respects bar one the latter delighted him. He found the children charming, while young parents behaved to their offspring with such a natural, unpremeditated blend of firmness and tenderness that they might have been animals uncomplicated by theory and dogma.

This much was a fulfilment of his fondest dreams.

But the older folk! They frightened him! They were all sort-of-clad, and what they "wore" was the finished version of the thing (?) that made Horad hard to look at.

Certain of these old ones, Lodovico could not even turn his head towards.

"It is because in your former existence, although you possessed the sense by which you now perceive them, there was nothing for you to use that sense on." This by way of explanation from Orlalee. It left him more confused than ever, and she tried to

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amplify her statement.

"You think you are seeing them," she offered. "This is not so. You are detecting them by their act in perceiving you."

"You mean I am a percept to them, as well? To—to a bunch of *garments*?" He understood well, now, why a mirror could not reflect him; this, though, was a fresh cause for dismay.

"That is not clothing. It is self. It is an example of the principle which you already know about: the one which imposes that you be conscious of self before we can perceive you."

Lodovico struggled gallantly after that concept.

"You mean you could not have perceived me unless I'd been a conscious being instead of a dead corpse."

"A dead corpse can be made easily from common substances."

He gave up. Seeing his bafflement, Genua—who was also with him, as usual—attempted another route.

"We have made calculations," she said. "In your time, persons died commonly after fewer than a hundred revolutions around the sun. We live much longer. When age begins to erode our memories, we arrange to have ourselves remembered by what appears to you to be a garment. It is a version of one's own personality that permits growth to begin all over again. Progress from one self to another may continue for thousands of years, though of course the first and final personalities would not recognise each other."

"These—these 'other-selves' are independent entities, then?"

"No, they are wholly dependent. They are reflections, they are objectified echoes, never more than copies of the persons to whom they belong. You, on the other hand. . . ."

Abruptly the implications of that curtailed sentence came storming in on Lodovico's mind. The world grew dark for an instant. When he could see clearly again, he found Horad was there too.

"Yes," said Horad in a grave and sympathetic tone. "That is what you are: the first such reflection of a self which belongs to someone who was born and lived his life in what to us is the far-distant past."

For a while after that revelation, there had to be an interruption in his exploration of this new age. But he made a good recovery and was able to go on.

There were no more cities. When he asked his companions how many human beings there were now they surprised and indeed

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alarmed him; they paused long enough to count. . . . And could not quite agree on whether it was more or less than thirty million.

People lived far apart, yet did not actually live anywhere. They were forever on the move, deciding that the mood they happened to be in deserved that climate, that season, that landscape, and acting on the conclusion.

Certainly they had homes. He was entertained at several and admired them extravagantly, for they were beautiful in ways that combined the supreme architectural achievement of literally hundreds of civilisations. He could not even try to keep track of all the cultures, long-vanished now, from which he was being shown relics. Ocasionally he thought he recognised something as Egyptian or Assyrian or Greek; when he inquired, he was given names he had never heard, Uglardic or Canthorian or Benkilese. . . .

Most agreeable of the survivals was the custom of celebrating by sharing food and drink, and beyond that scents and changes in the atmosphere which were sometimes more alarming than enjoyable, though all those around him seemed to know how to appreciate them. Feasts were held in his honour. He found he could taste, though he could draw no nourishment from, the miraculous dishes placed before him.

("You can eat, of course, since you are after your own fashion a person," Horad said. "But you need not. You are sustained by our awareness of you, and everyone you meet will make that existence stronger. We advise that you should eat if only because, perceiving that you do, we and everybody will find it easier to regard you as a real individual. If you enjoy the flavours, textures and scents, so much the better. We think of you as one who can." And he discovered the assumption was correct, though the logic behind it was still dream-like, tantalising, elusive.)

Art had lasted, but had spawned branches he could not see the purpose of. There was nothing for him in a communal ceremony which structured silence for a day and a night and a day except boredom. Unable to become weary, he perforce witnessed the whole of it, and when the audience (?) roused and dispersed they were beaming with pleasure and showered compliments on the person who was part-host, part-administrator.

The going?

Belatedly he wondered about it, and realised that there was none. There was *being here*—interlude—*being there*, which automatically became *here* instead. He asked about it, and Genua

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said, "Again it is a talent which you possessed, but did not know of because in your time there was nothing to provoke its operation. I cannot explain it; no one could. You must feel it as it is happening. Then in a little while you will go alone, without the help of me or Orlalee or Horad. If I were to say to you, 'Contract in succession the following muscles, which I point out on this chart, in each alternate leg, and then relax them in this precise order, and then to keep your balance do this and that with the muscles in your torso, arms and shoulders. . . .' Well, how many steps would you take in a day? Be patient. Soon enough you will have the principle in your bones."

He was secure enough now to essay a joke. He said, "What bones?"

Also there was the counterpart of work. This above all was as he had dreamed it might be, shorn of repetitive drudgery, free from commercial pressures: a series of acts undertaken at places where people came together for purposes of production, knowing always why they did what they did and informed about the benefits they were giving to others. He spent days and days watching fascinated as even very small children conjured useful objects (or at any rate objects he was told were regarded as useful, though he did not understand their function) from plants, from banks of clay, from roiling streams foul with sulphurous stench and dung-brown silt. He was running out of names, even of concepts; what adults did that they termed "working" was often as far beyond him as the other-selves he had mistaken for clothing.

Now the full force of his predicament hit him. He really was among people of a distant future age, and their thinking had changed even more than their bodily form. Hunting comparisons, he settled on the image of a convinced Christian from the Middle Ages set down in a twentieth-century community where nobody was bothered by the notion of living on a moving ball of rock instead at the fixed centre of the universe, where it was not considered in the least blasphemous to tamper with natural forms but on the contrary it was regarded as sensible and useful to modify and improve wild plants and even animals, to revise what that medieval person would think of as the handiwork of the Almighty, sacrosanct. He was pleased to have reached that image, for it offered a useful peg on which to hang the more unpleasant of his frustrations. There were many. Each passing day (not that he or anyone else to his knowledge was counting them) added to his sense of impotence and isolation.

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At first he had been delighted by the sheer novelty of his experience. Then by stages he had grown angry at not being able to grasp everything he was shown. Occasionally he had been shocked, especially when he learned that eroticism had endured and was now integrated into several art-forms, to the point where there were adults whose equivalent of a career consisted in instructing children, from babyhood up, about the amatory potential of their bodies.

He knew *a priori* that this was another medieval-visitor reaction, but it cost him much effort to reframe his thinking. He had been intellectually aware that even in his own age love-making had largely been separated from procreation, and it was logical enough that in the long run the division should become effectively total.

But there were private reasons why he had never partaken of whatever benefits this situation entailed. After leading a bachelor's life during his twenties and saying he was wedded to his work, he had been just about to marry when he was informed about his cancer. After which, of course, he had abandoned hope of any permanent involvement—wife, family.... Too little time was left.

"Did you have regrets?" asked Orlalee.

They were on a hilltop overlooking a plain dotted with brilliant flowers, beyond which a stormcloud loomed blue as new-tempered steel. He could not remember how they came here.

He said, "Yes, I should have liked to bring up a child—one at least. But in another way, no. I made good use of what time I did have. I enjoyed myself, especially when I was finding out something new. In one respect I was unusually lucky. Ideas often came to me in dreams, and while most people's dream-images turn out by light of day to be ridiculous, now and then mine proved to be sound, even important. Do you people still dream?"

"Of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"It is in the nature of mankind to perceive unrealities as well as realities. You are a dream as much as you are a ghost, Lodovico. You are the fulfilment, the concretisation, of one of the oldest dreams humanity has ever had."

"That being—?"

"The dream of the dead. The return of those who are no more. Those cut off before due time. Is it not there that one should seek

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the germ of the concept 'ghost'?"

"That makes sense," he conceded after a moment's thought.

And then, unexpectedly, she asked, "Lodovico, how do you like being a ghost?"

Without realising how honest and unpremeditated his answer was going to be, he heard himself say, "Very well!"

"If the same occurred to me I think I would miss much. I should like to hear your reasons in the hope they will be accessible to me."

"First tell me this. When you put on the—the other-self, is it the end of something for you? The conclusion of a stage of life, for example?"

"Oh, yes." There was something of sadness in her look. "It is exactly at the end of growth when we don them. To be full-grown is also to be dying; there is no boundary. . . . Well?"

Lodovico pondered. At length he said, "Yes, I miss a lot, too. But much of what I miss is not to be regretted, like having a physical body that cancer could corrupt."

"It does not do so any more," Orlalee said. "But you do have a

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physical body."

"What?" The shock was wrenching. "But—!"

"Look."

She caught his arm in her thin but strong fingers, and clamped tight. After a moment she released him. Pale marks showed on his skin that took a minute or more to fade.

"I—" Lodovico put his hand to his forehead, giddily. "I . . . !"

"Yes, that is the word: I!" She was smiling, and suddenly she was not alone because Horad and Genua had joined them.

Horad said, "Congratulations, Lodovico. You are a reality to us. All those people now alive who have not personally met you have at any rate heard about you. Since you are present in the total awareness of the species, you exist."

"But—!" Inchoate arguments flared in his mind, on such grounds as conservation of energy. How could the mere process of perceiving someone convert that someone from an impalpable phantom into a solid living being?

"Now I can do something I wanted to do before which wasn't possible," Orlalee said, and put her arms around him and kissed him in a manner which was indescribably ancient, all bar the taste of her, which was new.

After which all three made love to him and proved him real.

There was a moment when he felt it would be amusing to say, "I am become a perversion incarnate."

But none of them got the point.

"Lodovico," Genua said later, "you have now seen our world. Do you approve?"

"Of those things which I understand in it, yes. Every ideal of my time seems to have come to pass. Between any person and any other there is peace. There is no jealousy, nor greed, because there is enough to satisfy everyone. Nobody lacks the chance to attempt, if not accomplish, his or her ambitions."

"Ah, there's the trouble," Horad said. "There are so many ambitions we can see no way to fulfil."

Startled, Lodovico said, "So many? What can they be?"

"Long ago, even as long ago as your original time, men dreamed of visiting other worlds and eventually the stars. Even to have explored the local planets would have been a great consolation. But we are here on Earth, are we not?"

"I had been wondering," said Lodovico slowly. "There must have been attempts."

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"Indeed there were. People have circled the Sun more closely than Mercury does; they have dipped into the atmosphere of Jupiter, probed the frigid wastes of Pluto. But. . . . Well, for every attempt there have been countless failures. Come with us."

They were at a crumbled mound surrounded by lapping waves.

"From here," Orlalee told him, "a decadent culture tried to launch a ship directly to the stars. The venture was insane. There was an explosion which sank half a continent."

They were at a creeper-covered clearing in the midst of a great forest of pines and birches, where a snow-capped mountain loured down on them.

"A long time ago," Genua said, "people here trapped a bit of sun-stuff in a magnetic holder. It was not strong enough. There was a vast fire which lasted less than an eyeblink, and that too ended."

They were in a desert where sand-scratched rags of metal whined in a constant wind.

"It is believed," murmured Horad, "that this is the only spot where men ever held converse with another intelligence. What was said, we shall never know. It was uttered in the form of radiation such as only a star can emit. Perhaps it was a star which answered us, focusing its signal on less space than my arms can span. That was recently. You see the desert; plants have not had time to claim it back."

The pattern grew in Lodovico's mind.

A person is fragile. Out where stars send messages to one another it takes a great deal to shield and protect a human body. Moreover the person who makes the voyage must spend so much time thinking about sheer survival, it is nearly a waste of time. So long goes by; so little is discovered!

"And what," he asked at last, "does this have to do with me?"

"Everything," they said. It was not Horad who spoke, or Genua, or Orlalee; it was the combination.

"Why?"

"You are immortal."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, no. On the contrary." This was definitely Horad. Lodovico

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had grown to recognise and like his manner: a trifle dry, often witty, always individual. "Perfectly possible. We intended it to happen, and it worked out."

"How, though? How?"

"Because of the way you have been created. You are a compound percept: we have explained this already. Now, even to us who were present when you first impinged on a present-time consciousness, you are solid. You must eat and drink, or you would die. You are in every respect bar one a person like any other."

"The difference," Orlalee said, "is that we cannot conceive of any means whereby you might be destroyed."

"But you just said I can die—" Lodovico began.

"By your choice. Your own choice. No other way," said Orlalee.

"Not the brutal gales of a gas-giant planet," Horad said soberly, "nor the furnace heart of a star can abolish what to us constitutes Lodovico Zaras. For you *are not* Lodovico Zaras. You are his incorruptible, indissoluble, inerasable image upon the consciousness of all mankind."

"We can imagine you choosing to starve yourself to death rather than perform the service we hope from you," said Genua. "But the necessity will not of course arise. Were that to be your decision, even now we could arrange that you cease to exist. But we could not do it against your will."

"Service?" Lodovico repeated.

"Before we tell you what it is," Horad said, "we must emphasise that there is a good reason why you should say no. Now that we have made you real, you can feel pain."

"I was used to that in my original self," Lodovico said slowly. "Why should it be different, this time?"

"Because we want you to go where no one else can go, and come back and tell us what it's like."

He thought that over for a while, and said at last, not looking at them, "And this will hurt."

"Yes, As nearly as we can calculate, you will be hurt more than any other human being who ever lived. Worst of all, you will never have an escape route into death."

It was not until a long time afterwards that he said yes.

They had been right about the pain. It was clear, it was a simple fact, that no human being had any right to stand by the bank of a river running liquid helium, on the side of Pluto currently

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turned away from the sun, and admire the way its flow competed with gravity. Yet . . . he did it.

Perhaps it was that for him pain no longer portended danger, inasmuch as he knew he would not die until humanity became extinct. The agony, at all events, was transformed, and little by little he became able to endure it.

It diminished, indeed, so rapidly, that even at the conclusion of his first expedition it paled into insignificance alongside the frustration he felt when he struggled to fulfil his part of the bargain. How to explain in words the sensation of cold so violent it was like a flame? How to describe that river's colour, which lacking hue and brilliance and saturation was nonetheless seared into his memory like a scar?

Paradoxically, those who had sent him forth were well pleased. He had imagined failure, rejection; instead, when they had healed him they showered him with compliments and asked how soon he would be ready to leave again. (His going was by the route he had been taught since his resurrection. Any of the people who questioned him about what he had discovered could have taken it too, but for them it was useless when the destination was empty space or the surface of a hostile planet. He alone, none other, could survive a visit to a place like that.)

Among those who came to congratulate and thank him, he nearly did not recognise Horad because his other-self was more striking now, more disturbing to the vision . . . even though Lodovico had grown to accept that its essence was his. Natural human flesh clearly could not take the punishment he had consented to endure. Therefore. . . .

To Horad he put a question which went some short distance towards relief of his frustration; from Horad he received an answer which sustained him on the rest of his journey.

He said, "How is it that you people have drawn so much from the little I was able to convey in words?"

And Horad explained, "It is long past your epoch, Lodovico. For us, communication is not confined to speech. No more, to be candid, was it for you; for the most part, it seems, you imagined that it was, but in practice what you took for misunderstandings were very often the result of someone understanding another person 'only too well'."

With a final dry coda: "That phrase has no equivalent in any modern language, because in this tongue we are speaking there is the facility to make quotation-marks."

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All of which was a supreme achievement by an admirably evolved modern mind, a condensation into a few sentences of millennia-worth of reflection and analysis.

And because he understood this brief reply with such clarity even though it belonged to a much later age than his own, Lodovico was able to convince himself that the people of today were worth suffering for.

He went again. Again. Again.

They grew afraid. It had not been calculated that he should become obsessed with his travels to unsurvivable environments. Whenever they tried to tell him he had done enough, however, he ranted and raved until they let him depart one more time.

By stages they became resigned. They had created him. He was now himself. The creators had long ago lost control. It remained to derive what data they could from having him to talk to, or simply be with. Mad, wild, primitive, berserk?

Unique.

But offering—still miraculously offering—reports that others could study and transform into comprehensible, and thus into fascinating, information.

It had been a long time, as the psychic evolution of the human species went, since there was anything their ancestors might have termed *news*. . . .

They therefore tolerated it that he should learn: yes, they grow in Jupiter and Neptune and Uranus! Variously, from viciously to vicariously! (What does it mean? It means itself because no human ever before perceived it!)

As it became less than a marvel to him, for after all it was merely a not-Earth event and belonged to this universe, to this galaxy, this planetary system (shrinking by orders of magnitude with each review), he was able to describe his experiences in plainer terms.

In Uranus a creature ate him, fifty thousand miles long, and he survived. This among a million other recollections.

Naturally.

Neptune was the place where a sort-of-a-volcano was erupting icy lava at a yard per year and the nearby flora evolved to meet the threat and, as he watched, learned how to run at twice that speed. Again, among countless less communicable data.

As for Jupiter: there *something* greeted him, and told such a

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monstrous lie he came home persuaded it must be true on some other axis of perception. But he did not at once insist that he should go back, preferring to postpone a second meeting with—whatever.

Whereas Saturn. . . . He treasured that especially, not only for the methane-bergs and ammonia-bows and geysers, not even for the rings, but because whatever they were they were delicious and *so* proud of it and flattered to know their taste was being appreciated for the first time by a being from elsewhere. They had never realised that elsewhere was. It shattered their consciousness like the shell around an exploding chick (but there were neither chicks nor shells for them because they were distinctly *other* and had he not been immortal tasting them—and being able to accept they were delicious—would have done much more than simply kill him) #because of which there were potentially several trillion qualifications to any statement he was able to bring back and obviously it was futile to struggle with the# NATHELEES they went looking for other consumers. It was a hurriness. By the end of his visit none were left BUT there was no need to regret the extinction of their species BECAUSE they provided a symbol intimating #how he knew he didn't know but he #knew# and—and the hell with it# *gone to find the stars whatever they may be in the hope-identical-with-conviction they also eat us well.*

Nobody back on Earth liked that report. It was overshadowing. First time and they got it right, for a ridiculous purpose!

"But in what sense were they delicious?" demanded practical Orlalee, whom he had grown very much to like.

"In the sense they couldn't help," returned Lodovico. "They had evolved toward that goal for a billion years."

"You being the collective percept of us all," Genua mused, "we imagined you would bring back information we could understand."

"Especially," Lodovico suggested with a *moue*, "because I belong to a less evolved age, and you comprehend my total consciousness."

"Perhaps," Horad said, "we'd have done better with a consciousness derived from our time."

"But you could not," Lodovico said. "You could not have recreated a personality as complex and modern as your own. I am at the lower limit of what you can derive from yourselves and exter-

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nalise. Do not blame me, therefore, for my shortcomings; they are yours."

When they did not contest the statement, he added, "I am in luck. Being transported, as it were, to this time from another, far simpler age, I'm already primed with the assumption that there are many things I'm not equipped to grasp. Please stop thinking that because you could conjure me into existence you can do anything."

"Would it be fair to say"—this from Horad, in a pensive and leisurely tone—"that what consoles you for the horrors and agonies you go through is the impossibility of digesting even our tiny corner of the universe within one conventional lifetime?"

With emphasis Lodovico said, "No!"

"What, then?" All three of them seemed taken aback.

"In my old life I was resigned to the belief that, just as no observer can know both the speed and the position of a particle, so no consciousness can comprehend the universe which is the frame of its existence. That is among the facts which have not changed over the millennia.

"What I failed to appreciate was how much more important it is to *be-conscious* than it is to *comprehend*. Possession of even a meagre imagination permits the owner to envisage processes that are forbidden by the laws of nature. Therefore any consciousness automatically transcends its universe."

"You are sure of that in so short a time?" Horad breathed.

"I was led to believe," Lodovico said wryly, "that you were indifferent as to whether a time-span is long or short."

And he added, "May I now continue my explorations? Or do you have no further need of reports from me?"

"Indeed we do," said Orlalee. "We welcome them. They are and will remain unique."

"You mean you do not expect ever to go where I am going?"

Genua parried that question. She said, "Is there not a lot of the future still to come?"

The zone of the asteroids he found to be crowded with events, but almost all of them were of a similar kind: collisions. He had much time, while witnessing them, to ponder the implications of the conclusion he had voiced to Harod. It was no more than a matter of probability; however, given that this petty corner of the cosmos was typical of, if not the whole, then a very large volume of it, and given that he had met consciousness on several occa-

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sions already—what was more, versions of consciousness capable of recognising him as an aware being even before he identified them—such data convinced him that consciousness must be of the essence of the universe.

It changed his own view of himself-as-he-now-was. Instead of that lingering resentment he still fought against when he set out, he was overtaken by a sense of gratitude so intense it was almost happiness. It might have been on any other conformation of awareness that the chance to be-first fell. It fell to him. Therefore. . . .

(After his long spell in the asteroid belt, they asked whether he had grown bored on his quest, and he replied, "Bored? It would be impossible. A man can who can grow old, fatigued, confused—he may feel boredom because it is senility in little. As you have made me, I am no longer vulnerable to it.")

The cratered plains of Mars—the wind-punished valleys of Venus—the bleak hot mask of Mercury . . . and at last, climactically, the Sun. He plunged from the corona to the core, and when he came back. . . .

It took the longest time of all to heal him. Doing what he had done had strained the collective credulity of Earth, and he who had survived the crash of asteroids and the fall of methane avalanches was much less believed in than before.

And yet—and yet—it had been done. . . . *He* knew, who had also doubted the possibility. Gradually the means came clear to other people, and with conviction healing followed. The mechanism? It was not and never had been mechanism, but only that-which-does-the perceiving, liberated.

So the time arrived when those whom he now called his friends were able to visit him and talk.

"You have suffered," said one or perhaps all three of them. "Do you regard it as worthwhile?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because what has been wrong with humanity since the beginning is not wrong with me. We have always had the imagination that belongs with immortality, but we have been trapped in destructible substance. It is small wonder that in ancient times there were so many religions that insisted on a life after death. Even our dreams rebelled against the idea of dissolution."

"But it has been considered by many of the cultures we know

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about that death is a boon."

"Is it so regarded now?" Lodovico countered. "Now that you've achieved so many of our old ambitions—peace, plenty, freedom from fear?"

They exchanged glances. Or, more nearly: a glance was exchanged among the three of them.

"We doubt it," Horad said at last.

"And you are right." He uttered the words with fervour. "It is what it was first believed to be, a burden we have laboured under far too long. And how can you not credit this, you whose supreme achievement has been to create the other-selves, the reflections of your personae which make you halfway to immortal?"

"It is not that we disbelieve it," Horad said. And the other two seemed to join him in speaking. "It is that we did not until now realise how right we are. Before we evoked you, we had begun to wonder whether there might not be a proper time for a species to die, a time chosen by itself. Thanks to you, we have been satisfied on that score. We go to fix the date for the suicide of man."

He who had been crushed by clashing asteroids, who had been vaporised by the solar phoenix cycle and returned, was overwhelmed by the purport of that promise. When he recovered enough to formulate a counter-question, he found there was no listener to put it to. He was alone.

After he got over the need to rail and scream, very slowly the truth dawned on him.

His mode of thinking was ancient. Worse—it was primitive. At the heart of it lay an assumption he should have discarded long ago, only the idea had never previously occurred to him. It was by that assumption he had been misled.

He was used to taking for granted that he was *somebody*.

It was a measure of the success Horad and Genua and Orlalee had achieved that he should have gone on believing, or rather not worrying about, this aspect of his nature until now. He must, he realised, correspond in minute detail to the version of Lodovico Zaras who, aeons ago, had discovered that he was due to die of cancer and preferred to choose his own moment and his own way to leave the world.

But he *was-not* that person.

He-now was not some body. He was some one.

And the distinction was indescribably important.

Ghosts!

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"You arrived at understanding," they said when they returned.

"Yes, slow on the uptake though I was."

"There will be others." The problem was dismissed with something like a casual wave. "For those who date back furthest, it is not improbable that centuries will go by while they gradually begin to perceive the universe as it is instead of in the manner which their gross, half-evolved brains allowed them to accept. But it is not of course the brain which matters, is it?"

Lodovico knew exactly what was meant. Now. And if he could do it, so could others. He said, "Have you chosen the date?"

"As nearly as we can. We have been at pains to calculate in the sort of terms you used to apply. In less than half a million years it will no longer matter what becomes of Earth. Let it freeze or burn, let it wander the interstellar gulf or fall into the heart of the sun. There will be no more men and women. We shall have recalled and re-perceived every human being who ever existed, free like you to go everywhere, experience everything, and survive to remember what happened. Thank you, Lodovico. You gave us precisely what we dreamed of. There can be no greater gift in time or space."

"But," he said, thinking of termination in his simple, primitive fashion, "if there are to be no more humans. . . ."

"It is for the best reason," they replied. "We created you to help us determine whether our species has engendered as much consciousness as is proper to it. The fact that you are as-you-are is the evidence we wanted. The ambition of a rational, intelligent species is not as-much-as-possible, but *enough*."

"At Saturn I ran across a similar decision," Lodovico said. "I do not yet see what you mean. But in the certainty that I eventually shall, I am glad to abide by the conclusion of mankind."

"It is good," they said, and went about the necessary business.

So in ripe time it was done, and mankind died as a material species. But its hordes of ghosts were billions strong, and went to compare notes with strangers who had made the like discovery, to confirm or disprove what they had found out about the universe, and often enough learned they had been wrong.

Often enough to keep them curious and intrigued for at least the current cosmic cycle. Even immortality cannot shrink the gap between the galaxies.

Sic fiat.

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Scithers:

What a disapointment. To have missed the first three editions of one of the finest science fiction magazines I have read in some time, a matter I have already taken steps to rectify. It is indeed gratifying to see a publication affiliated with a man who has brought me so many hours of pleasure, Isaac Asimov. Please count me as both an ardent admirer and a habitual subscriber. In the hope of many happy years to come,

Sincerely,

David A. Poore
Ft. Walton Beach FL

Yes, my heart bleeds for all who have missed any issues at all, and I must point out that subscription, endlessly renewed, is the one sovereign remedy.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Congratulations and thanks for another excellent issue. My only major complaint is having to wait another three months for the next.

I enjoyed most of the stories and the features (though I still think *Star Wars* was a lousy movie. If the Force was with the good guys why were they such poor actors?). My favorite story was by the newcomer Garry Osgood. Though the idea of an immortal is by no means new, Mr. Osgood handles it well, and I liked particularly his story's ending. I also liked very much the Good Doctor's "The Missing Item" and de Camp's "Heretic in a Balloon," though the latter's ending left me yearning for more. I also enjoyed Reynolds' "Boarder Incident" and Steve Utley's story.

The only story I can say I really disliked was "A Simple Outside Job" by Robert Hawkins. Lets face it, a plot centered around the fact that burning methane gives heat leaves something to be desired.

And much as they made me groan—bring back the puns!

Sincerely yours,

Clark W. Ingersoll

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You now need wait only two months; and, we hope, we will cut that interval, too. And the puns will appear at suitable intervals, even if I have to write them myself.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

Unfortunately I missed the first three issues of your marvelous new magazine, but I discovered the Winter, 1977, issue on the newsstand of the University Bookstore, and I'm subscribing at once. It was especially nice to see more of an emphasis on *science* fiction than on fantasy. I hope Dr. Asimov will write a story for every issue, or at least as often as possible.

Sincerely,

Pamela A. Draper
Columbia MO

I, too, wish I could write a story for every issue; but, alas, despite my incredible good looks, I am only human; and we will have to settle for "as often as possible."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers,

I just wanted to write a few points about *IA'sfm:*

1. You have not printed a fair amount of letters with criticism in them. I'm sure you get them, and printing complimentary letters of two lines is not very constructive.

2. If you have illustrations they should be good ones (Vincent Di Fate being an excellent example).

3. It was sensible to remove Dr. Asimov's face off the cover; the magazine does not need *it* to sell.

On to issue 4: A mixed bag, really. Several stories were just pointless and mediocre; these were, "A Simple Outside Job," "The Several Murders of Roger Ackroyd," and "Backspace." But the magazine did contain the excellent "Time and Hagakure," the very excellent "Heretic in a Balloon," and a very good first sale by Garry R. Osgood. As usual the books column was very good.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Ashley
Mitcham, Surrey

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I assure you we do not get very many letters that are critical, and we have no hesitation about printing them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov:

To show you that your magazine is getting around, while on guard duty in Germany I found your Winter issue in the Jeep I was patrolling in. After my patrol, I started reading and was so impressed with the stories, also by the whole magazine and the way it was put together, I had to write and tell someone.

I have read many other magazines and yours outclasses the rest by far. There is really no other comparable to yours.

Keep up the good work.

SGT Charles R. King II
APO New York NY

I am glad you found it and enjoyed it, but what misguided soul left the magazine behind? I would like to see all issues carefully held onto and preserved.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I'd be interested in writing for *IA'sfm*. Please send me a description of your guidelines for writers.

As an SF book reviewer for the last four years in a local magazine, I can say that I am glad Charles N. Brown merely lists the new titles with a succinct summary of each new book and refrains from making tedious and dogmatic value judgments. I don't trust book reviewers who play the pompous judge; I'd rather just be informed of what's new and make my own decisions at the bookstand.

This is not to say that I am against critical articles and essays on SF, which have no obligations to name titles of books sent by publishers.

I have just read Isaac Asimov's 1953 article in Damon Knight's collection of critical essays, *Turning Points*. I wonder if Dr. Asimov has changed his mind on any of the statements he made in "Social Science Fiction"? Has he any new thoughts on definitions of science fiction considering all the changes he's seen science fiction go through since then? (No age insult intended.) Because it is impossible to keep up with his phenomenal output, can

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you tell me if he has recently published any critical articles on the subject?

Thank you,

Joseph V. Francavilla
Kenmore NY

I have new thoughts on the subject and have not published critical articles on it. However, my editorials in this magazine are devoted to science fiction, and I intend to speak my mind on all facets of the subject. So keep reading.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear George:

Have just finished *IA'sf* no. 4, and thoroughly enjoyed it. Distribution of your mag. to NZ is slow (the same is true for all SF magazines), and this one arrived about 2½ months after the date given in no. 3. However, coverage is good for such a newcomer (*IA'sf* is better distributed than *F&SF* here, in fact.)

I am writing in primarily because (if the letters section shows a fair representation) most of your feedback comes from in the US, whereas the mag. sells internationally. I would like to note here that few copies appear to be returned from here: all disappear from the bookstands and shops within a week or two of their appearance. If this is true (you must keep a record of nos. sent and returned), then possibly you could up NZ's quota?

Now, on to the stories: keep Isaac appearing; regardless of Rick Wilber's comment (not entirely, I think, false) none of the Asimov so far has been bad by most standards. "Good Taste" and "Think," however, are not up to the G. Dr's. usual standard. "The Missing Item" is well-written, but the ending's a trifle weak. I rate "Boarder Incident" best story, though; then "To Sin Against Systems," "Backspace," "The Several Murders . . .", and "The Missing Item."

Best wishes with the magazine, and may you soon become monthly.

Yours Across the Water,

G. R. Hills
Wanganul, New Zealand

Welcome news. A quick disappearance from the bookstands (if through sales) is our dearest ambition. Let's hear it for down under.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov,

Can you imagine my disappointment, when I got to my mail box and removed the remains of my Jan-Feb copy of your magazine? Though its contents weren't damaged to the point that they could not be deciphered, the magazine itself looks somewhat unsightly sitting next to my nice neat copies of *Analog*.

Despite the mangled and tattered pages and cover, I am enjoying the excellent selection of stories that you publish. And as soon as I finish this letter, I am going to write a check to extend my subscription. I, and I'm sure many other subscribers, would be willing to pay a little more for the inclusion of mailing covers, so our copies could reach us in "mint" condition.

Anything you can do to protect my purchase until it reaches me will be appreciated.

Thanks for listening.

David W. Brewster
Pocatello ID

You are not alone in your unhappiness over the postal misadventures of the magazine. We will take the matter of mangling and tattering under advisement.

—Isaac Asimov

To all of you,

I, like many others, enjoy *IA'sfm* immensely. Everything in the magazine is good—the editorials, regular columns, the stories, and the letters. The letters are especially good. For once I can get a glimpse of others' views on SF.

There was one thing I *really* liked—although, I'm sure, many won't agree—the puns. But, alas, so few others relish the thought of puns. Oh, well such is life.

Thanks so much for something so good,

Jeanette A. Jernberg
Highland IN

George and I are terribly fond of puns and we will sneak them in when no one is looking—just for you.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Mr. Scithers,

I am very happy to see that you are now bi-monthly. I am very sorry to see the new way you are mailing out subscriptions. Why on Earth can't you just continue to send it in a plain brown wrapper?

The Owlswick press part made me wonder, are you L. Sprague de Camp? I will confess to never having heard of George Scithers before this magazine, but I have loved L. Sprague de Camp for years.

I must disagree with Linda Manning Myatt on her opinion of "When There's No Man Around"; it was my favorite for the whole issue. Before you write me off as a pig or whatever let me say in my own defense that I change my son's diapers at least half of the time, my wife works because she likes to get out of the house, and I let her carry out the trash.

Sincerely,

Rocky D. Hasty

For details on George Scithers, please see the editorial in the first issue. He and Sprague de Camp are long-time friends with many overlapping interests. They are, however, distinct individuals, not to be mistaken for each other.

—Isaac Asimov

Letters which tell us what you like best about the magazine, what you like second best, and so on—and what (if anything) you actively dislike—are very useful because they tell us how to aim this magazine. On the other hand, letters which chat about one subject—any subject—and do it interestingly are the letters that we most often use in this letter column. Both kinds of letters are needed; send 'em to me at Box 13116, Philadelphia PA 19101. This is also the address where you should send story manuscripts (but please, before you do, send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to me so that I can send you some information about story preparation). And we always want to know how our newsstand distribution is working—both good news and bad are needed here.

Subscriptions—and correspondence about them—go to an entirely different address: Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 1855, General Post Office, New York NY 10001. If you're having problems, let us know! (If everything's going well, let us know that too.)

—George H. Scithers

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LEIGH BRACKETT HAMILTON

7 December 1915—18 March 1978

by Randall Garrett

Leigh Brackett has been part of my life for forty years. From Captain Future to Star Wars II (for she finished the first draft of that sequel script before she was hospitalized), her writing has added richness and depth to science fiction.

And the lady herself has touched the entire science fiction world with grace and charm. She was always visible at conventions, which are the strongest and most personal communication centers between fans and writers.

She never sought the limelight, though she would serve on panels when she was asked. Yet I seldom saw her alone at a convention—there was always a group of fans and friends around her, absorbed in discussion. She thrived on that unique bond, based on common interest, that is shared by science fiction people all over the world.

Leigh was well aware of the effect she created in science fiction. She set out to deliberately introduce believable people into science-based stories. She knew what she was doing, and she knew she had the skill to do it.

But that never stopped her from being entertained and impressed by other writers. And we all regarded a compliment from Leigh Brackett to be high praise indeed. But there was one man whose work she admired above all others—Ed Hamilton.

When Leigh presented the first annual Edmund Hamilton award last October at the Octocon in Santa Rosa, California, there were tears in her eyes. In the twenty-five years I have known her, that was the first and only time I have ever seen her cry. I am deeply grateful that Leigh lived to see her own favorite writer so honored.

During a panel discussion years ago, someone in the audience made the statement that for science fiction to be effective, it required more than science. It needed beauty.

Leigh agreed, but added: "More than beauty—it must have *love*."

Leigh had a great deal of love. She shared it happily with Ed, she put it into her writing, it permeated her life. She offered and received it from her many friends. Leigh Brackett Hamilton was a great writer and a beautiful person.

She'll be badly missed.

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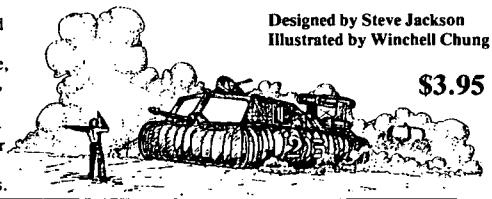

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